

DELL

FIRST  
EDITION

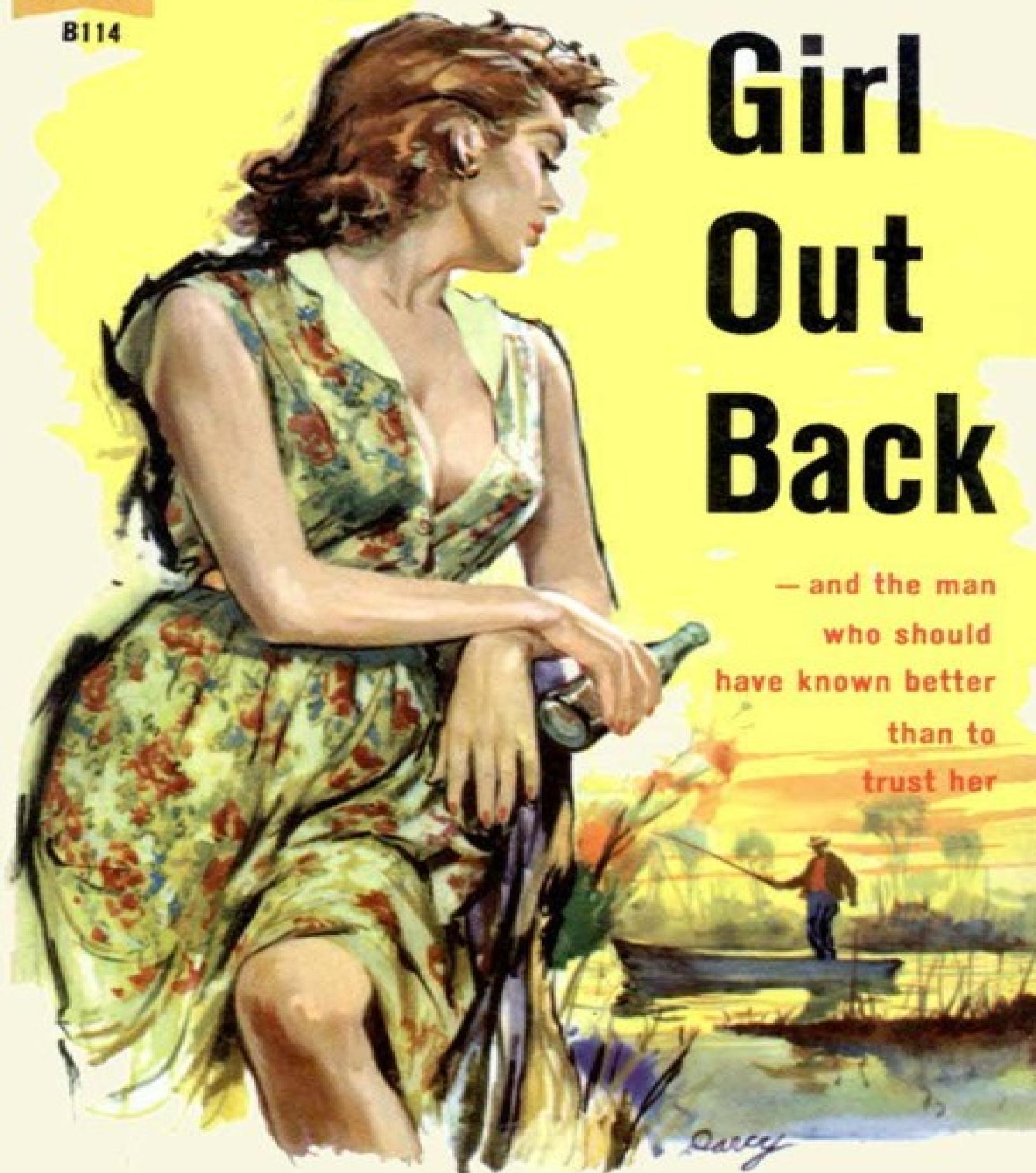
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Charles Williams

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# Girl Out Back

— and the man  
who should  
have known better  
than to  
trust her



# Girl Out Back

by

Charles Williams

1958

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# One

“Barney.”

Maybe if I pretended to be asleep she’d stop. She didn’t.

“Barney?”

“What?” I asked.

My name is Barney Godwin. I’ve been around for thirty years, one day at a time. I have an utterly useless education, a happy and industrious set of endocrine glands, good reflexes, and a wife who’s worth two hundred thousand dollars. It’s a living.

“I just wondered if you were asleep,” she said.

Her name is Jessica Roberts McCarran Godwin. She is thirty-four years old and is a prime mover in the Wardlow Women’s Club, Save-the-Trees-on-Minden-Street Division. She is currently an ash blonde, has very lovely, big, blue eyes, and her figure hovers somewhere between voluptuous and overblown, though she can still make voluptuous in ten days on Ry-Krisp and lettuce when she wants. She wears a thin gold chain around her left ankle. This may not blend too well with that Save-the-Trees kick, but it does have an exciting look under sheer nylon.

“Have you cleared it up?” I asked.

“What up?”

“Whether I’m asleep or not.”

“Well! You don’t have to get nasty about it.”

I didn’t say anything. She was probably right; I didn’t have to get nasty about it. I was on the payroll, wasn’t I?

“Isn’t the moonlight pretty?” she asked.

Moonlight slanted in under the honeysuckle about the second floor bedroom window and fell across her bare left leg from pelvis to toe as she elevated it slightly and rotated the ankle into the high-heeled-shoe position or the position-for-taking-cheesecake-photographs. The chain was a thin

tracery of gold against gleaming silver. Not bad, I thought. This was Percy Bysshe Godwin, drunk with beauty.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

I told her, in my best drunk-with-beauty manner, what I was thinking about. You don’t have to keep hitting Godwin with the cue.

\* \* \*

Violence was gone from the night. She lay with her cheek against the pillow watching me with the languorous well-being of a relaxed cat. Her eyes were quite soft and dreamy in the shadow.

Then she laughed.

“Who do you think you’re kidding?” she asked.

“Kidding?” I reached out on the night table beside the bed for a cigarette.

“You and that little priss.”

So we were going to have one of those what-movie-were-you-seeing? routines. I lighted the cigarette and dropped the match in the tray.

“What little priss?”

“You know who I mean.”

“No,” I said. “But don’t tell me. Let me guess. Maxine? Francine? Maurine? Corinne?”

“You make me sick.”

“Chlorine? Fluorine? Gangrene?”

“Aren’t we cute? A rhyming tom-cat.”

Sometimes a change-up pitch will work. “Shove it,” I said. I’d like to get some sleep.”

“Well . . . !”

“In case it’s escaped your attention I go to work in the mornings. You can lie around in the nest till noon if you want to.”

“Fat chance. That cotton-pickin’ Reba comes tomorrow. She can make more noise . . .”

“Well, cheer up. Everybody has a certain amount of tragedy in his life.”

“Let’s don’t get sarcastic”

“Fine with me. Let’s just log a little sack time.”

“You weren’t really thinking about her, were you?”

I sighed. "Who?"

"That angel-faced little hypocrite. I know the type; if she thinks she . . ."

"I knew I'd guess it in a minute," I said. "Just give me a few clues, that's all. You mean Barbara Renfrew. Am I right?"

"You're damn right you are."

"Knock it off, will you?" I said. "You should know, if anybody does, that she's not even there any more. You made it so tough for her she finally quit and went to work in the bank. Or don't you remember?"

"And isn't *that* too bad? So now you never see her more than three or four times a day."

"Twice," I said. "That's as often as they'll rent us the vault. You should see the way they fixed it up, though. Mirrors, and black sheets . . ."

"Oh, shut up!"

"They just have to be careful, that's all. Banking is a very sensitive business, and just one hint of commercialized vice . . ."

"Will you, for the love of God, stop it?"

"Why?" I asked. "I thought you wanted to talk about Barbara Renfrew. I'll tell you what—let's barbecue some spare-ribs and bring 'em up here to bed with us and have a picnic while we kick it around for the rest of the night. Would you say her eyes were really blue, or violet?"

"You think it's funny, do you?"

"No," I said. At two o'clock in the morning when I was trying to sleep I didn't think anything was funny.

"Well, no cheap tom-cat is going to make a fool of me in this town. If you think I'm going to have people laughing at me behind my back . . ."

"Show 'em your real estate," I said. "Nobody ever laughs at real estate."

"Laugh! Go ahead! Why don't you just admit you have nothing but contempt for me? Tell me I'm older than you are, and that I'm fat and stupid . . ."

I was tired of it. "Oh, for Christ's sake, shut up and go to sleep."

"Don't you talk to me that way!"

"Well, stop talking like a fool."

"A fool, am I? Well, maybe you're right, at that. I didn't have any better sense than to marry a cheap tom-cat that was just out for what he could get. . . ."

"All right," I said. "So you did. So what are you crying about?"

“Oh! So you admit it?”

At that stage of the brain-washing I would have admitted to being a coloratura soprano for an hour’s sleep. “Yes. Just type out the confession and I’ll sign it.”

“You hate me, don’t you?

“If you say so.”

“No! I want to hear what *you* think.”

“I’m not paid to think,” I said. “I’m a gadget. I’m the Little Gem Home Companion, the do-it-himself household appliance with ears. It makes love, and listens to seven hours of crap without rewinding. . . .”

She sat up in fury and swung a hand at my face. I caught her wrist and held it while she struggled, her body a futile writhing of silver and velvet shadow in the moonlight. We’re probably an inspiring sight, I thought. I put my feet on the floor and stood up, pushing her back and away from me. She sprawled on the bed with her face down in the pillow. Neither of us had uttered a word. I stood for a moment feeling the difficulty in breathing because of the tight band across my chest, and then I turned and went out and down the stairs.

I padded barefoot through the hot darkness of the living-room. Going on back to the kitchen, I yanked open the door of the refrigerator, feeling the cold air pour out against my legs and feet as I took out a can of beer. I was dressed only in pajama bottoms, and in the light from the refrigerator I could see the shine of sweat on my arms and torso. The hell with her. She could take her jealous tantrums and her gourd-headed suspicions and erratic emotional pattern and her satin-upholstered bedroom talents and her late husband’s real estate and nuke a package of them. . . .

I slammed the fridge door shut and hit the kitchen light switch to locate the beer opener, savagely punched the can, took a drink of the beer, and then carried it down the short stairway at the back of the room beside the washing machine.

The big basement room, a sort of combination workshop and study, was mine; she rarely came near it except once or twice a month to supervise Reba’s cavalry-charge version of sweeping and tidying up. I clicked on the light. The room ran the full length of the basement. This end was finished in natural mahogany paneling I had put up myself; on the left were the recessed bookshelves with their rows of books, while the two glass-fronted

cases on the right held the fly-rods and the three shotguns I owned. A heavy, leather-upholstered chair stood under a reading lamp near the bookshelves, and beyond it was an old couch retired from the living-room during the last redecorating cataclysm.

I was fed up. The old cynical detachment that had carried me through so many of these tirades was beginning to crack, for some reason, and I was losing my temper like a chump. I didn't understand it. This was Barney Godwin? Being needled by a corn-fed blonde? Why didn't I just pack and get out? It wasn't worth it. I finished the beer, turned out the light, and lay down on the couch, staring moodily at the silvery sheen of moonlight beyond the basement windows. It was a long time before I went to sleep.

I awoke to coolness and the faint, gray beginnings of dawn. Even before my eyes opened I was aware that it was someone's moving inside the room that had waked me, and then something settled softly over my body on the couch. I turned my head drowsily and looked up. She was leaning over me in a sheer nightgown, tucking the sheet about me. Still half asleep and without conscious thought I reached up and put my hand gently against her cheek. She dropped to her knees beside me.

“Barney,” she whispered wildly. “Barney, why do I do it?”

My arms tightened around her and for an instant I was caught up again in that old, wonderful, eternal woman-feel of her, the way it had been at first. I held her roughly, almost fiercely, and then I was fully awake and it was gone. *Clumsy, clumsy*, I thought mockingly. There is no room in the higher echelons of industry for impetuous high-school boys. Move over, son; you're not even on the payroll. I stood a little way apart and watched myself with professional detachment as I went about consolidating the advance position, reflecting at the same time that in courtship the male could suffer no greater handicap than sincerity.

When I left to go downtown at seven thirty she was sleeping peacefully beside the cool freshness of the open bedroom window while a mockingbird erupted with the glittering and showy repertoire of a concert violinist in the magnolia just outside. I whistled as I backed the station wagon out of the drive under the big oaks.

\* \* \*

Wardlow's business district consisted of one street three blocks long. The highway traffic ran through it, slowed by twenty-five mile-an-hour speed limit signs at the city limits and one traffic light in the center of town where the bank, Headley's Drug Store, Woolworth's, and Joey's Cafe stood on the four corners athwart the intersection of Main and Minden Streets. Most of the residential area lay to the north and west, largely on this end of Minden Street.

There were few cars about this early in the morning. I crossed Main when the light changed and drove on to the store. It was two blocks farther east on Minden, near the railroad tracks. There was little else over here—a fruit-packing shed, Homer Jolinson's body-and-fender shop, and a used car lot. The store was a long brick building in the center of an otherwise vacant lot that took up most of the block. Around the sides and in front the lot had been covered with white pea gravel for a parking area. I drove around to the right side and parked.

The building had originally housed an automobile showroom and garage. The dealer had given up the ghost during the war years when there were no cars to be had. McCarran bought it for a low figure just before his death of a heart attack in 1952. He was already retired then, having sold his hardware store and farm implement agency the year before because of bad health, but the inactivity bored him so he had opened the small tackle shop in the front of this old building, more for a hobby than anything else. He was fond of hunting and fishing, and the place made a good spot for old cronies to hang out and second-guess the shots they'd missed and the bass that got away. He'd been shrewd enough to see the growing boom in small boats and outboards that had started right after the war, but his health and the fact he already had it made had prevented his doing much about it. He sold a few motors, and that was about it. In two years I'd built it up to where it cleared seven thousand a year.

There were big plate glass windows in front on either side of the door. I unlocked the door and went in. There were no partitions inside except that enclosing the small office on the right about a third of the way back and the motor repair shop at the extreme rear of the building. Up front, next to the windows, were the glass showcases that held fishing tackle and miscellaneous skin-diving equipment. At the left, opposite the showcases, was a counter behind which were the guns, rods, and water-skis. From there

on back to the doorway leading into the repair shop the whole floor area was taken up with boats and trailers and the stock of outboard motors we kept on hand.

We didn't open until eight thirty. I closed the door behind me, leaving it on the spring lock, and went into the office. It was partitioned off from the rest of the floor by varnished plywood panels seven feet high, and there was a window I'd had cut through the outer wall for ventilation. I opened it now, switched on a light because the whole interior was somewhat dim until the big sliding doors on each side had been opened, and sat down at the desk to get out some letters.

I was just signing the last one when I heard tires crunch on the gravel outside. I looked at my watch. It was five minutes to eight, a little early for Otis to be showing up. I shrugged and started pawing through the drawers of the desk for a stamp. Now where was it Barbara used to keep them? Maybe I'd had sense enough to leave them in the same place. . . . I stopped and looked up. Somebody had rattled the front door.

It couldn't be Otis. He had a key. I stepped out into the showroom. An old station wagon was parked in front of the near show window and a tall girl with tawny hair was just turning away from the door. She walked out to the car and started to get in.

I stepped up front and opened the door. "Hello," I said. "What can I do for you?"

She turned. I didn't know her. "Are you open?" she asked.

"Not yet," I said. "But if it's important . . . ?

"I was supposed to pick up some motors," she said. It was a nice, throaty voice, down in that end of the contralto range actresses sometimes use for a burlesque sexiness, but there was none of that in it. There was nothing in it, in fact, except indifference, faintly tinged with sullenness. She was supposed to pick up some motors, but if she didn't it was all right with her.

"Sure," I said. "What were they? Repairs?"

She nodded slightly. "Nunn. George Nunn."

"Oh. Then you're Mrs. Nunn?"

"That's right," she said with the same indifference. If it turned out I was Mrs. Nunn she wasn't going to raise a stink about it.

"I think they're ready to go," I said. "Come on in."

I pushed the door back and stood aside. She stepped up on the concrete walk and went past me. She was quite tall. I'm six feet two, so in the scuffed spectator pumps she was wearing she must have been close to five eight. Her legs were bare. The predominantly blue cotton dress she had on was just another number off the rack, well worn and often laundered, and while it was somewhat tight across the chest for a couple of somewhat obvious reasons I noted it only in passing. Now that bust-line architecture has become a basic industry, like steel and heavy construction, all the old pleasant conjectures are a waste of time and you never believe anything until the returns are in from the precincts. The cascade of tawny hair fell to her shoulders, bobbing a little as she walked and framing a dead-white face on which there was no expression at all, unless utter stillness is an expression. The eyes were a smoky gray, fringed with dark lashes that were almost startling against the milk-white skin, and the mouth had been good to begin with but she'd overpainted it into a sullen smear with too much of the wrong shade of lipstick. Well, it was her mouth, wasn't it?

I indicated an aluminum frame chair in the front of the showroom near the showcases. "Sit down. I'll get the motors."

It was dim inside the shop. I clicked on a switch and a bank of fluorescent tubes over the lone work-bench came on and an electric fan began whirring. There were a half-dozen dismantled motors scattered around on the bench in various stages of repair, but I walked on over to the end of the room where the completed jobs were clamped to individual dollies. They were both there, 3-h.p. motors with tags that read "Nunn" on one side and "Tested OK" on the other.

George Nunn ran a fishing camp on Javier Lake, about thirty miles away in another county. It was an enormous, marshy body of water in a wild area, accessible by road most of the year only at his place on the lower end. I'd been over there a few times duck hunting, but it was before he'd taken over the camp. He'd been in the store two or three times, and still owed me around fifty dollars on a motor he'd bought from me. I lifted the repaired ones on to the bench and started wiping them down with a piece of waste. In a moment I heard a clicking of high heels on the concrete floor of the showroom. She came in and stood watching me after an indifferent glance around at the bench and the shelves of tools and spare parts.

"How's the fishing on Javier?" I asked.

She shrugged. "All right, I suppose."

She set her purse on the bench and took out a cigarette and a folder of matches. The breeze from the oscillating fan riffled the mane of tawny hair and blew out the match before she could get the cigarette going. She threw it on the floor, in spite of the fact there was an ash-tray right in front of her. She struck another that went out. It went to the floor also. I held a lighter for her.

"Have you got a telephone out there?" I asked.

She blew out smoke and looked up at me with eyes as expressionless as nailheads. "Why?"

"Business," I said. "Advertising. If your husband will call me when he has some good catches over there I may be able to get them in the Sanport papers. You know, the outdoors columns in the *Call* and the *Herald*. Blake and Carstairs both check here twice a week by long distance."

"We've got a phone," she said. "Party line. Sometimes it even works."

"You'd be surprised how good it is for business," I went on, "to get the name of your place in those columns now and then. I pick up a lot of free advertising that way."

"That's nice," she said.

I started to give her a wheeze about how to phone in the information, to be sure to get the fishermen's names right, and the type of gear used, and so on, but when I glanced around I saw she wasn't even plugged in. She was still watching me, but she hadn't heard anything I said. I finished wiping down the motors, nodded for her to precede me, and carried them out front.

"How much?" she asked.

"Just a minute," I said. I went into the office and lifted Otis's work order off the spike, added up the labor and material charges, and then found the amount of the old balance.

"Seventy-four thirty-five," I said when I came back. "That includes the old balance of forty-eight dollars, plus twenty-six thirty-five for repairs."

She came around opposite the cash register and put down her purse. Taking out a billfold, she counted out three twenties, a ten, and a five. I was inwardly congratulating myself on getting the whole amount, and it was only half-consciously I noticed two of the twenties were crisp, brand-new ones. I counted out her change, put the bills into their respective compartments in the register drawer, and closed it. I tossed a "Thank you"

into the bottomless void of her disinterest, and carried the motors out to the station wagon. She got in, and I closed the door for her. It struck me then, for the first time, that it was odd she was here so early. It was a long drive, part of it over back-country roads.

“You must have left very early,” I said.

She switched on the ignition and I thought for an instant she wasn’t going to answer. Then she turned her head just briefly and trained that flat stare on my face. “I spent the night in town,” she said. “I’m a trusty.”

## Two

She backed the station wagon around and took off with a scattering of loose gravel under the tires. I stood looking after her for a moment, and then shrugged and went back inside. Whatever was eating her was none of my business; I was in outboard motors. Go home, Moddom. Go back to the little home and the faithful husband.

In the office I resumed the search for the stamp box and finally ran it to earth in one of the bottom desk drawers. There were only a half-dozen threes in it. I probably hadn't remembered to buy any since Barbara left. I stamped the letters and made out a petty cash slip for twenty dollars. Might as well get a supply while I was at it. And make the bank deposit while I was out, I thought; this was Monday morning, and we still had Friday's and Saturday's receipts in the safe.

I opened the safe, stamped and initialed the checks, and counted the currency and silver. After adding it all up on the machine, I remembered the money Mrs. Nunn had paid me. I should break up at least a couple of those twenties for change to start the day with. Counting out forty dollars in fives, singles, and coin, I carried it out to the register and rang up NO SALE to open the drawer. As I was sliding the twenties from under the roller in the right-hand compartment I was again idly aware of the crisp freshness of the two on top. I didn't really know why, because in any kind of business where you handle much currency you run across new bills all the time. Perhaps it was because there were two of them back-to-back and because they had curled a little under the roller with their ends sticking up. One of them had what appeared to be a brown stain of some kind along the edge for about half the width of the bill.

I set them aside, put the petty cash receipt in the drawer, and distributed the change into the proper compartments. I slid one of the twenties into my wallet for the stamps and was just closing the drawer when I heard the rasp of a shoe on the pavement outside. I glanced up. It was Otis. He unlocked

the door and came on in as I was putting the wallet in my pocket and gathering up the other two twenties for the bank deposit. He lighted a cigarette and looked sadly at the register.

“Tapping the till again, boss?”

His full name is Otis Olin Shaw. He’s around forty-five, and looks a little like the pictures of Lincoln at that age except the black hair is thinning and is gone altogether from a small round spot on his crown. His unvarying facial expression is that of an undertaker who’s just learned his best friend has been cremated by a rival establishment while owing him three hundred dollars. This bleak sadness, however, covers a gall-and-wormwood sense of humor, a lot of intelligence, and something verging on genius when it comes to internal combustion engines.

“Good morning, Herr Schopenhauer,” I said. “What’s the cheery word?”

He shook his head and followed me into the office like an aging Great Dane, sitting down at the desk and watching mournfully as I stuffed the currency and checks into the white bag I used for the deposit. “I was just telling the old lady this morning,” he said, “that there was a chance you might raise me to fourteen a week now that heroin is getting cheaper. . . .”

I added the twenties to the currency and clipped the adding machine tally to the deposit slip. “Don’t count on it,” I said. “That cheap stuff is cut, and I need more of it.”

He raised a hand. “Oh, I don’t begrudge you a nickel of it myself. It’s just—well, the old lady’s always after me. Going around town, she keeps seeing all these women wearing shoes. You know how it is, stooped over that way picking up cigarette butts. . . .”

“Belt her one,” I said, “and keep her at home. What kind of a man are you, anyway?”

“I just haven’t got the heart, boss. She’s usually carrying around one of the kids that’s too weak to walk. . . .”

He had one child, a boy of around fourteen who already looked like something out of the back-field of the Los Angeles Rams. They owned their own home and Otis cleared around a hundred a week with salary, commissions, and overtime, now that he’d got a raise when Barbara was purged and we both had to double part time as clerks.

He went back to the shop. I wrote out checks for a bunch of bills that were due on the tenth, and then opened the big sliding doors at the sides of

the building. It was growing hot now at eight thirty of a still and cloudless morning in August. I swept down the showroom around the boats and trailers. We had over a dozen models on the floor, running all the way from a car-top duck boat to a sixteen-foot inboard runabout that sold for close to two thousand.

As soon as the bank opened I called out to Otis to watch the front, took the deposit from the safe, picked up the outgoing mail, and walked over to Main. Brassy sunlight beat on my bare head and I could feel beads of perspiration under the thin sports shirt. I crossed with the light and entered.

It was a small place, a branch of the Mid-South Bank & Trust of Sanport, with only a couple of tellers' windows and Warren Bennett's desk behind a railing at the right. I got in line at Arthur Pressler's window, feeling almost chill in the sudden transition from the outside heat to air-conditioning. At the far end, behind a counter, I saw Barbara Renfrew seated at an automatic book-keeping machine, her smooth dark head bent over her work. She looked up in a moment, saw me, and smiled in that shy, quiet way she did. It occurred to me that now she was no longer working for me making a pass at her would be permissible under the revised ground rules without a loss of face on both sides, and that I really should, since I'd been accused of it so many times. It was an attractive thought, but I shrugged it off, hardly knowing why. Maybe it was because I didn't share Jessica's staunch faith in her accessibility. Clod, I thought. Godwin, you lack scope and vision. . . .

“Good morning, Barney.”

The line ahead of me had disappeared and I was facing Arthur Pressler through the bars of his window. “Good morning,” I said, passing over the cloth bag. He pulled it open and began adding checks on the machine with the precise and economical movements of some super-robot out of the twenty-second century. He was a rather cold-faced man in his early thirties, with sandy hair, rimless glasses, and a no-nonsense set to his mouth. As far as I knew he had no existence outside this cubicle of his, as if he'd been bought from I.B.M. and bolted to the floor, but he could handle money faster than anyone I'd ever seen. He did it almost in a blur, and he was infallible.

I lit a cigarette and watched him now. He finished the checks and tossed them aside, and then tore into the bundle of currency, dropping it into neat

and separate bunches of singles, fives, tens, and twenties. Then he did something I'd never seen him do before. He was counting the twenties. The fifth or sixth was one of those new ones Mrs. Nunn had paid me. It dropped, and the next one started to come down on it, and then he broke his rhythm. He paused. With an almost imperceptible shake of his head he picked them all up and started over. He'd lost count. It was odd, I thought; maybe they hadn't been oiling him properly. He passed me the duplicate of the deposit slip and I went out and down the street to the post-office.

\* \* \*

Business was brisk for Monday. Besides incidental items of tackle we sold one complete rig: fourteen-foot plywood boat, 7-h.p. motor, trailer, and all the incidentals such as a spare gasoline can, kapok seat cushions, and icebox. After the customer had taken delivery and driven off I sent Otis out for a couple of cans of beer to celebrate the deal. I took out my wallet to hand him a dollar, and as I did I noticed I still had that new twenty dollar bill. That was odd. Hadn't I bought those stamps with it? apparently I'd paid for them with my own money, which I usually tried to keep separate on the other side of the divider. It didn't matter, though; there was no change involved to foul up the register and the books.

Otis went out. I was transferring the twenty to the other compartment of the wallet when I saw it was the one that had the odd brownish stain at one end, along the edge. I looked at it, and then turned it over. It was on both sides for about half the width of the bill, and extended up along the paper for perhaps an eighth of an inch or less. I wondered idly what it was. It seemed odd there'd be a stain on a bill this fresh from the Federal Reserve vaults, unless they were using taxpayers' blood for ink now in the printing office.

At four thirty in the afternoon I was up front alone looking for the boat manufacturer's ad in this month's *Field & Stream* when a car pulled in and stopped in front of the window. I saw with a glance at its front license plate it was from Sanport, but when the driver got out he didn't look much like a potential customer. At least he wasn't on a fishing trip at the moment. He was dressed in a blue summer-weight suit, white shirt, pale blue tie, and a Panama with a gray band. Salesman, I thought.

He lifted a briefcase out of the seat and came in, a man somewhere around fifty with dark hair that was graying at the temples, composed brown eyes, and a quiet, efficient look about him.

“Good afternoon,” I said, “what can I do for you?”

“Mr. Godwin?” he asked pleasantly.

“That’s right,” I said.

He put the briefcase on the counter and held his wallet in front of me, opened to an identification card. “Ramsey,” he said. “Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

I suppose everybody has that same sinking feeling in the first fraction of a second, wondering what crime he’s committed to get the F.B.I. after him. Then it’s gone, of course, as soon as you realize it’s just a routine security check. Your old friend Julius Bananas has applied for a job balancing a teacup for the State Department and they want to know if he was ever a Communist and how he stood on some of the fundamental issues like girls.

I grinned at him. “Don’t tell me I’ve made the list.”

He smiled, but he didn’t get carried away with it. He’d probably heard all those feeble gags a thousand times. “Are you busy?” he asked. “I’d like to talk to you for a minute, if I could.”

“Sure,” I said. “Fire away. Or, wait; let’s go in the office. There’s a fan.” The whole day had been still, and now in the late afternoon the dead, humid air was stifling.

We walked back to the office and I switched on the fan. He sat down in the straight chair in front of the desk with the briefcase in his lap. I pushed the typewriter stand out of the way and sat down in the swivel chair. Taking out cigarettes, I offered him one, which he refused with a smile and a shake of his head. I lit mine and leaned back.

“What’s it about, Mr. Ramsey?” I asked.

He unstrapped the briefcase and took out an oblong Manila envelope. It seemed to me to be rather small to contain much of a file on the aspiring Mr. Bananas, but then maybe they’d just started and hadn’t come up with much yet in the matter of his political aberrations and mating habits.

“I wanted to ask you about this,” Ramsey said. He slid something out of the envelope and dropped it on the desk between us. I stared at it.

It was a crisp, new twenty-dollar bill. It was, in fact, the same twenty-dollar bill I had in my wallet.

I wondered if I'd gone crazy. It had to be the same one; there was that narrow brown stain in exactly the same place, Then I got it. It was obvious, of course. This was the one I'd deposited in the bank. They'd *both* had that stain, but I just hadn't noticed it. When I looked at them in the cash drawer, they'd probably been turned end for end.

"It's familiar?" he asked quietly.

So that explained Pressler's hesitation when he came to it as he was counting. He'd spotted something phony about it, or it had rung a bell of some kind in his mind, just enough to throw him off stride.

"Yes," I said. "I think I deposited it in the bank this morning."

This morning; It must be hot, whatever it is. That was only seven hours ago, and it took three to drive here from Sanport. "You're sure?" he asked.

"Reasonably so," I said. "It's new. And there's that hairline discoloration at the bottom. I'm pretty sure I remember seeing it."

He leaned forward a little. "When?" he asked. "I mean, do you remember where you got it?"

"Then it is the same one?" I asked. "It came from the bank?"

He nodded. "I picked it up over there just a few minutes ago. Presumably somebody spent it here at your store. Do you remember who it was?"

I was just about to reply when the phone rang. It was up front on the showcase next to the cash register.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'll be right back."

I went out and picked up the receiver. "Boat Supply. Godwin speaking."

"My, you sound businesslike." It was Jessica's voice, teasing and faintly provocative. "Mrs. Godwin speaking," she went on, imitating me. "Look, honey, would you be a real cute lamb and run over here for a minute?"

"Where?" I asked.

"Mr. Selby's office. We need your signature on a thing."

We. We need *your* signature. Oh, what the hell, I thought; cut it out. You're developing rabbit ears.

"Sure," I said. "I'm busy right now, but I should be able to make it in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"But, Barney, he wants to go home. It'll only take a minute."

I regarded the enormity of it. I was keeping Mr. Selby from the bosom of his happy little family. I was not only an annoying by-product of the

community property laws, I was a churl who would inconvenience Mr. Selby.

“Jessie, I’m tied up at the moment. I’ll get there as soon as I can. Or why don’t you drop by here with it?”

“It has to be notarized,” she explained, with just a touch of exasperation. It wasn’t necessary, of course, to explain what the paper was. “Look, Barney, for Heaven’s sake, there isn’t anything so important about selling bass plugs that you can’t get away for five minutes.”

“I told you I’d be there as soon as I could.”

“You’re just keeping us waiting for no reason at all. Mr. Selby . . .”

“And how is dear Mr. Selby? Don’t forget to keep your skirt pulled down.”

“Barney. are you coming over here?”

“I told you. When I could get away. Did it ever occur to you I might be busy?”

“I notice you never seem to have any trouble getting away for those stupid fishing trips you go on. . . .”

“I’m sorry,” I said. Next time I’ll clear through channels.”

“Do you *have* to do this?”

I could feel that tight band across my chest again. Selby was probably listening to her, Ramsey to me. “No,” I said. “And, anyway, why don’t we wait till we can buy radio time and get on the air with it?”

She hung up.

I put the receiver back on the cradle with a hand that shook. I was raging inside. She could stuff Selby and her lousy real estate—I stopped. What was happening to me, anyway? I was beginning to act like a sucker. What had ever become of Godwin the smooth operator?

I suddenly remembered Ramsey back in the office. I rubbed a hand harshly across my face, trying to wring the emotion out of myself so I could think. So what about Ramsey? The thing that stuck out was that he was after something, and that it was big. You could feel it. Look at the way it had happened. It was only seven hours ago I’d deposited that money in the bank, and now. . . . It was like throwing a match in spilled gasoline.

The questions began coming from every direction. What was it? Why was it so hot? Where did Mrs. Nunn fit in? And how had she happened to

have two of them? In that backwoods fishing camp? It was impossible, but there it was. And why the F.B.I.? I stopped suddenly.

*Haig. Wild Bill Haig.* I brushed it irritably aside. Why Haig? The F.B.I. must have a few other men it wanted; it didn't exist for the sole purpose of trying to run down a man who had simply evaporated eighteen months ago.

I turned and went back to the office. Ramsey had got up and was looking out the window. We both sat down again and I picked up the cigarette I had left in the tray.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Now, where were we?"

"Do you remember when you took it in?" he asked.

I drew on the cigarette and frowned. "Let's see—that deposit was Saturday's receipts. No, wait. Friday's and Saturday's. I didn't go to the bank Saturday at all."

He nodded. "Well, that pins it down to two days. Try to think back. There should be a pretty good chance you can isolate the sale."

I was thinking, but not about that. I was regarding the haphazard operations of Chance. I *could* have deposited both those bills. I *should* have bought the stamps with the other. It *could* still be out there in the register, where he was certain to look before he left. Instead, it was in my pocket. One could have been a fluke, lost in the shuffle; but not two. If he'd traced two of them to this place he'd know damn well I should remember the circumstances. It would mean either one sale that necessarily had to be more than twenty dollars, or a repeater who came in twice and paid for something with identical, new, fresh twenty-dollar bills.

"Is it counterfeit?" I asked. I didn't think the F.B.I. had anything to do with that, but I wasn't sure.

He shook his head. "No. It's perfectly good."

"It's just hot, then?"

He smiled faintly. "You might call it that."

Kidnap pay-off? I thought. Transportation of stolen property across a state line? What else? Bank robbery? I was back to Wild Bill Haig again.

"Can you place it?" he asked quietly.

I shook my head, frowning. "No-o. It beats me." I was conscious this was the first deliberate lie. The others had all been evasions.

"But it has to be within those two days? Friday or Saturday?"

That's right I made a deposit Friday morning."

“There’s no chance it could have been left over in the register or in the safe from previous receipts? I mean, as change, or an oversight, or something like that?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “We leave change, sure; but nothing larger than tens.”

“How about this morning? Before the bank opened?”

I shook my head. “No-o.”

*Otis.* Otis had come in while I was taking Mrs. Nunn’s payment out of the register. He would know those motors had been picked up. And also that the charges had been over twenty dollars. Careful, pal. Careful.

“Well, we’ve got something to start with, anyway,” Ramsey said. “We’ve isolated it to two days’ receipts. Now—what is your approximate volume of business?”

“About forty thousand last year.”

“That breaks down to around—hmmmmmm—,” he said, frowning. “Say between a hundred and hundred-and-fifty a day.”

I didn’t say anything; I merely nodded. That was an over-simplification, and it was badly booby-trapped. But if he didn’t see it I wasn’t going to tell him.

He went on. “But along with tackle you sell boats and motors. Items of two hundred to a thousand and more. So a lot of your business must be in large individual sales, paid by check.”

It was no wonder criminals didn’t like to tangle with them, I thought. Still, there was a certain pleasure in watching an incisive and well-honed mind at work, even if you were watching it from the other side of the fence.

“That’s right,” I said. “But on the other hand, in the course of a day we sell a hell of a lot of small items. Flies, leaders, plugs, lines, spinning lures, and so on. We make change for a lot of twenties.”

He nodded. “Most of your business is local? That is, with people you know, at least by sight?”

“A good part of it, yes. Say within a fifty-mile radius. But fishermen can come from anywhere. We even get a lot of trade from Sanport.”

I was still thinking about Otis. I had to find out, before I went too far with this.

“It’s just possible the shop man may know something about it,” I said. He covers the front when I’m out.”

“I was just coming to that,” Ramsey said. “Is he here now?”

“Yes,” I said. “Just a moment.”

I went out in the showroom and called him. He came in a moment later, wiping his hands on a piece of waste, which he shoved in the pocket of his overalls.

I performed the introductions, and let Ramsey take it from there. Otis looked at the note, frowning, and then shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I don’t place it.”

I sat down and lit another cigarette.

“It came from here,” I said. “There’s not much doubt of that; it was in that bank deposit this morning. You were here when I was making it up—remember, you came in while I was putting the change in the register. Do you recall seeing it while I was doing all that?”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “But, hell, you could look right at it and not see it. It’s just another twenty-dollar bill. I could have taken it in myself.”

He hadn’t noticed. I was shuffling money and he was making sardonic wisecracks about it, but that was as far as it went. He didn’t know I’d taken two twenties *out* of the register while putting the change in.

He went back to the shop.

I sighed and spread my hands. “Otis just about named it,” I said. “You look at money, but you never see it. Nothing but the figures in the corners.”

He nodded. “I’d appreciate it if you’d keep trying, though. There are a number of angles in a thing of this sort. If the man comes back, for instance, you may remember waiting on him Friday or Saturday. When you sell a particular piece of merchandise, try to remember the last time you sold the same thing and how it was paid for.”

“Okay,” I said. “Now, what about if another one shows up? You want me to call the bank? Or you?”

“Call our office in Sanport. We would appreciate it.”

“Any new twenty?” I asked. “Or does it have to have that mark?”

“The mark is not significant,” he said thoughtfully. “Though it may have it. The things to watch for are the year, and then the number.”

“Is it all right if I write this one down?”

“Yes.”

I pulled over a pad and drew the bill toward me. While I was copying the number I studied the stain intently. I was beginning to have an idea

about that, and I was pretty sure he did too. I tried to memorize the exact form of it.

“Anything else?” I asked.

“If another one comes in with very close to the same number, call us immediately. If you know the person passing it, give us his name and address. If he’s a stranger, try to get the license number of his car and a good description of him. Unobtrusively, of course.”

“Any others beside the twenties to watch for?”

“No. That’s all,” he said. “Except . . .” He opened the briefcase again and came out with about a dozen photographs which he handed across to me. “Have you ever seen any of these men?”

There were no names on them, but I didn’t need a tag to recognize the seventh one I turned up. It was Bill Haig.

## Three

There was no doubt of it; I had seen his picture in the papers several times, and it was even displayed in the post-office on a "wanted" notice right now unless it had been taken down in the last week.

I leaned back in the chair and shook my head after I had looked at all the mug shots. "I've never seen any of them around here," I said. "But doesn't it strike you as odd that hot money would show up in a sporting goods shop. Doesn't fit, somehow."

The brown eyes and the lean, alert face were thoughtful. "You never know," he said. "And, of course, the chances are it was through several hands before it got here."

"In other words, the person passing it wouldn't know there was anything wrong with it?"

"That's right. You didn't, did you?"

"I suppose you're not allowed to say what it's all about?" I said.

He shook his head with a faint smile. "I'm afraid not. Not at the moment, anyway."

He asked if he could check the register for any more of it. There was none, of course. We shook hands and he drove off. I watched him go up the street, feeling the other one burning a hole in my wallet. I didn't do anything, though, until Otis came out. That was inevitable.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "But it's plenty hot."

"You can say that again. You couldn't have raised more stink if you'd tried to deposit a live bomb."

"Could be a kidnap pay-off," I said. "Or bank robbery. Something like that."

He turned to go back to the shop. "Well, we sure got a high class of trade around here. You think I ought to start wearing a carnation to work?"

As soon as he was inside the shop and at work I crossed to the office. I sat down and took the one out of my wallet, reaching for the pad I'd written the number on. They checked! They were not only close; they were consecutive. One ended in—23, the other in—24.

I turned it, studying the stain along the bottom and feeling intense excitement. As nearly as I could tell, it was exactly the same as that on the other, same place, same shape. Those bills had been stacked, probably in their original binder, when this substance—whatever it was—got on them.

I moistened a finger and rubbed it along the stain. A minute amount of the reddish-brown came off.

Dried blood? That was dramatic, but improbable. Blood would be darker, and it would scrape off. This was a stain. No, my first guess was as good as any. How had he put it? The mark wasn't significant, but another one *might have it*.

It could be rust, plain iron oxide picked up by contact with rusting metal. If it weren't significant, that probably meant it hadn't been there when it had left legitimate hands. So perhaps —just perhaps—it had been stored for some time in a metal container in a place that was slightly damp.

I lit a cigarette and leaned back in the chair. None of it made any sense at all. The thought of its having anything to do with Haig was laughable—but there was the fact his picture had been among those mug shots. It was a fascinating puzzle any way you looked at it. And it was made even more fascinating by the fact that Haig, at the time he had disappeared off the face of the earth, was carrying with him a hundred and sixty-eight thousand dollars.

I needed an excuse, and ten minutes before closing time it came along as if I'd written the script myself. Two fishermen stopped in on their way back to Sanport. They had seven bass, the smallest of which weighed three pounds.

“Where?” I asked, hanging over their icebox.

“Sumner Lake,” they replied.

“With live bait? Or hand grenades?”

“Fly-rod bugs. Cork poppers. . . .”

“Cut it out,” I said. “In August?”

“It's the truth,” they said. “We found an underground spring. The water was this cool. . . .”

Otis had come out too. He glanced resignedly from the fish to me and sighed. "How long'll you be gone?"

"Where?" I asked.

"Hah," he said mournfully.

Sumner Lake was perfect. It was ninety miles in the opposite direction. "Well, if you insist. But I wouldn't knock off go fishing for anybody but you."

"You want Pete to come in?"

Pete was his boy, the fourteen-year-old who looked like a Sherman tank. During summer vacations he sometimes filled down here when I went fishing.

"Sure," I said. I went back in the shop and picked up the 3-h.p. motor I used on rental skiffs. I put it in the back of the station wagon, along with a can of fuel. We locked up.

"I'll be back Wednesday night or Thursday," I said. "And, look. If another of those twenties comes in, call the F.B.I. in Sanport. They want us to watch for them; here's the serial number of the other one."

I drove home. When I pulled into the drive under the oaks I saw her Chrysler was in the garage. So she was home, and probably loaded to her silken ears with my inhumanity to dear Mr. Selby. Here we go again, I thought.

She was in the kitchen writing a check for Reba for the day's housecleaning, wearing a lightweight knit thing that looked as if she'd been built into it by an oriental sybarite with a do-it-yourself kit. It was strange; her clothes were never tight on her but you didn't have any trouble sensing that their occupant wasn't a collegiate pole-vaulter. Well, maybe there a Turk somewhere back in my ancestry and I was just sensitive to the voluptuous wave-form of her particular radiation. She'd been to the beauty shop, and her hair-do gleamed like embossed and highly polished chrome. The full-mouthed and broad-planed face was as outrageously blonde as the rest of her, faintly sensuous and at the same time stamped with that strong suggestion of purely female cussedness that was no lie at all.

She turned the blue eyes on me now and smiled with sweet deadliness. "Oh. Home so early, dear? I didn't think you'd be able to get away."

This was for Reba's benefit, and you could see it was fooling her. She took her check and started retreating toward the back door before she got

blood on her.

I opened the refrigerator and took out a can of beer. "Oh," I said. "Something important came up, sweet. I'm going fishing."

"Isn't that nice. Reba, Mr. Godwin is going fishing. Does your husband fish much?"

"Yes'm," Reba said. "He fish ever' now an' then."

"Well, I think it's so wonderful for men to have a hobby, don't you?"

"Yes'm," Reba said. She left. She was forty-something and had learned what this world does to non-combatants.

The blue eyes flashed. The first pitch was high and inside and smoking. "Well! Just leave me sitting there like a fool! You couldn't get away from your precious toys for five minutes to show a little consideration for your wife, but you can drop everything to go fishing. And what do you suppose Mr. Selby thought?"

She couldn't make me lose my temper now. I was too excited about this other thing, and I wasn't even thinking about her. "Oh, he didn't mind," I said. "Think how he enjoyed looking at your legs."

I took a drink of the beer and did a brief impersonation of the oleaginous Mr. Selby stalking a crossed thigh. He was the devious type, the long-range planner; he maneuvered into position and then caught the target obliquely on a passing shot.

"Mr. Selby is a gentleman—!"

"Which is more than you can say for some people you know," I said. "Did you bring home that paper you wanted me to sign?"

"I told you it had to be notarized," she snapped.

"So you did. Well, by God, that'll teach me a lesson; the next time you whistle I'll dash right over."

"You enjoy humiliating me, is that it?"

"No," I said. "It's actually just confusion. I get busy down there and forget which way I'm supposed to jump when you press the button."

"Oh, you make me tired."

"Take a rest, then. I'm going to Sumner Lake and I'll be gone till Thursday."

She stared coldly, facing me across the kitchen. "The Wheelers are coming tonight to play bridge. But that wouldn't matter, would it?"

"Tell 'em to stay home and start their own war," I said. "Haven't they got any initiative at all?"

She whirled and went out. She looked regal as hell. I finished the beer and went down the stairs to the basement. The instant I was alone everything else faded from my mind and the thousand fascinating aspects of the puzzle came swarming back at once. Did Mrs. Nunn know that money was hot? She couldn't have. Then how had she got it? Why two of those bills? I irritably brushed all the questions aside. There were no answers to any of them, and I was merely wasting time. I began gathering up my camping and fishing paraphernalia—duffel bag with my fishing clothes and shaving gear in it, tackle box, fly-rod, mosquito dope, and bedding. I wouldn't need cooking equipment or food; my information was the Nunn's ran a lunch-room of sorts along with the three old cabins and the boat and motor rental business.

I carried it all out to the station wagon. It took two trips. As I was going through the living-room the second time she came down the stairs from the second floor. I paused, with both hands full, and said, "Well, see you Thursday. . . ." She stared, stony-eyed, and said nothing. I went on out to the car, threw the rest of the stuff in, and slammed out of the drive.

I turned left on Main, going north toward Sumner Lake. Javier lay to the south and east and this would be a roundabout way to get there, but when you start lying you have to be consistent. I stopped at a service station on the highway at the edge of town and had the gasoline tank filled and the oil checked. The man who ran it, Wendell Graham, was a fisherman himself and a frequent customer at the store.

"Lucky devil," he said. "Sumner Lake, huh? I hear it's been pretty good."

"I'll let you know," I said.

Eight miles north of town I turned off the highway on to a secondary road going east. It was a little after six. I met few-cars. Twenty miles ahead the road connected with another north-south highway, State 41, after skirting the edge of the wild and heavily timbered country at the upper end of the lake. State 41 passed along the east side of Javier at a distance of two to three miles. There was an access road in from that side, but it ran through swampy bottom country and was passable only in dry weather.

There were a few more cars after I turned on to 41, though traffic wasn't heavy. It was not one of the principal routes to the coast. Once as I topped a slight rise I could see the unbroken wildness of the bottom country to the west, though I could not see the lake itself. It was broken into channels and inlets this far up and they were out of sight in the timber. It was superb duck hunting country in winter, but the only way in then, aside from walking, was to leave your car at the camp on the south end and go up by boat. At the foot of the grade was the poorly banked S-curve that had killed five people in the past three years. I slowed automatically, even though the road was dry, idly noting the white crosses the Highway Department had put up on the shoulder where cars had gone off the road due to excessive speed or drunken driving. I frowned thoughtfully, trying to remember something that nibbled at the edge of my mind. Then I was past. It wasn't important.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later I turned right again, leaving Highway 41 and taking to the country road that wound through the area to the south of the lake. The sun was gone now and warm summer dusk was thickening out through the timber. When my headlights sprayed against the three rural mailboxes and the old sign on my right I slowed and turned in through a cattle guard to a pair of dusty ruts going north across an old field long since abandoned to weeds and nettles. It hadn't rained for a long time and the growth beside the road was powdered with dust. In a few minutes the road began to lead downward through increasingly heavy timber where fireflies winked in the darkness.

I passed some cleared land on my left and an old farmhouse sitting back off the road. A dog barked with bristling outrage and came hurtling out of the darkness to chase the car. A boy's voice yelled, "Come back heah, you crazy Trix!" The faint light of a kerosene lamp glowed at a window. The R.E.A. hadn't penetrated here; it was too thinly settled to warrant the lines. There was one more farmhouse beyond it about a half mile and then the road was lost in the immensity of timber. I crossed the stream that was the outlet of the lake on a rattling wooden bridge. Low places in the road had been filled with gravel to make it passable in wet weather. My headlights swung in huge arcs, splashing against the trunks of trees, as I followed its windings. The vastness and solitude of it made me feel good; I had always liked wild places. A little less than a mile beyond the bridge the road forked, one pair of ruts leading off to the left. The sign had fallen down, but

I remembered it had pointed to the right. In a few minutes I came into the clearing. When I stopped and cut the motor I could hear the frog chorus along the shore of the lake.

There were four buildings, three small ones huddled darkly together at the edge of the inlet on my left and a larger one just ahead and to my right. Hot light streamed from an open doorway. I saw only one car, the station wagon Mrs. Nunn had driven this morning. I cut the headlights and got out.

“Who is it?” a man’s voice called. It came from outside the doorway. He was standing to one side of it, away from the light.

“Godwin,” I said. “From Wardlow.”

“Oh,” he said. He stepped before the door then and opened the screen. “Come on in.”

I followed him. The illumination inside the crudely finished room came from a hissing gasoline lantern suspended from a rafter with a length of wire. Insects whirled about it in a frenzied dance, butting their heads against the shield. On the left was a short counter with three stools before it and beyond the end of the counter was a glass-topped showcase containing items of fishing tackle. There was a small screened window at the other end of the room and an open doorway at the left behind the pass-through between the ends of the counter and showcase. This presumably led to their living quarters in the rear of the building. Behind the counter was a small icebox and a bottled gas stove which had two burners and a hamburger grill. On the shelves above the stove and icebox were some cartons of cigarettes, cans of soup, condensed milk, small cereal boxes, and some doughnuts in cellophane bags. Some shelves along the right-hand wall held a small stock of staple groceries, a few cheap magazines, and a large stack of comic books. I glanced at the latter, faintly puzzled. Well, maybe he read them himself. I didn’t particularly like him.

He’d been at various times a town constable and deputy sheriff until some political shake-up had pushed him away from the trough for good, and it was said he was crooked. It wasn’t this latter, however, that had rubbed me the wrong way the two times we’d met; moral indignation was a little out of my line. It was just that he seemed too impressed with his own toughness, as if he could still feel that holstered gun banging against his thigh.

He went behind the counter, hung a cigarette in his mouth, and struck a match on his thumbnail. Maybe he picked it up from reading private eyes; it was stock gesture 93-B, Hard Case Lighting a Cigarette. He was about my height, but rail-thin, with a bleak and angular face that seemed to have been stretched too tightly over the bone structure behind it. There was no warmth in the sherry-colored eyes. He dropped the match on the floor, still watching me through the smoke with no expression at all. They must have an interesting home life, I thought—the two of them staring at each other and dribbling a fall-out of dead matches around the place.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

“I’d like one of your cabins,” I said. “And a boat, for a couple days’ fishing. How’s it been?”

“So-so.” He shrugged indifferently. “You never been out here before, have you?”

“Once or twice,” I said. “Duck hunting. It was before you bought the place.”

“So you decided to try the fishing, huh?”

“That’s right,” I said. He didn’t appear to be the gushing type that fell all over a new customer, but I wasn’t paying much attention to him. I was trying to figure out where they kept their cash and made change. There was no register in sight.

“Anything else you want?” he asked.

I turned back to him. The harsh angularity of his face was broken into planes of highlights and shadow by the overhead light. From the waist up he wore nothing but a sweaty undershirt, and his arms and shoulders looked like a muscle chart from an anatomy textbook. There wasn’t enough subcutaneous fat to smooth the contours; he was as functional and uncluttered as an axe blade. The stare said nothing at all.

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Motor? Bait? Guide? You need anything besides a boat?”

“No,” I said. Maybe if I didn’t ask for too much he’d let me stay.

“Take the cabin on this end,” he said. “It’s not locked.”

I still had to get a look inside their cash-box, wherever it was. I hadn’t driven this far just to sleep. “How about a sandwich and a cup of coffee?” I asked.

“It’s pretty late.”

“I know it is,” I said. “But I haven’t had any dinner. I drove out here right after work.”

“You must have been in a hurry. Really like to fish, huh?”

“Yes,” I said. I was beginning to like him even less.

Without turning his head toward the door behind him, he called out, “Jewel!”

There was no answer. The room was silent except for the hiss of the lantern and the faint spattering sounds of the insects bumping against it. He started to turn, as if to call out again. She came through the doorway, dressed in a man’s blue shirt and a pair of dungarees. She gave an almost imperceptible start when she saw me, but then the surprise or whatever it had been was gone and her face closed up like a drawn Venetian blind.

“Fix Mister Godwin a hamburger,” he said curtly, without turning his head.

“At this time of night?”

“Never mind what time it is; I got a watch. He come off without his supper.”

She stared silently at the back of his head for an instant, and then walked over in front of the icebox. I sat down on one of the stools. She lighted the burner under the grill and slapped down the meat patty she had taken from the icebox. He watched her flatly for a moment and then turned away. A bug banged into the lantern overhead and fell to the counter where he lay on his back, buzzing his wings. The meat began to sizzle after a minute or two and she turned it with the spatula, leaning forward slightly with the tawny mane of hair swinging downward across her cheek. A cockroach came up from somewhere and walked along the edge of the counter. It looked shiny in the white, hot light. She stared at it, and then pushed the hair back from her face with her hand.

“Grease,” she said, almost in a whisper.

His eyes turned, but he made no other movement. “What?”

“I said grease. G-r-e-a-s-e.”

“What about it?”

“Nothing. I love the smell of it in my hair.”

“You sure as hell have a hard time,” he said.

“What gave you that idea?” she asked. “Not many women can go around smelling like they slept with their head on a rancid hamburger.”

Something made her look up then, and she caught his eyes on her. She stopped abruptly. The room was caught up in that taut silence again. Then it was broken by the sound of the telephone—two long and two short rings.

He came around the end of the counter and lifted the receiver off the hook of the instrument mounted on the wall near the door. It was an old type, with a hand crank.

“Hello,” he said. “Yeah, this is Nunn . . . Sure . . . Sure . . . Okay . . . Around daylight . . . Okay, I’ll be ready. Good-bye.”

Then, before he replaced the receiver, he spoke into the mouthpiece again. “Jest in case some of you old busybodies missed part of it, that was a man in Woodside. He wants to go fishin’ tomorrow, and he wants me to guide him. Any questions?”

He dropped the receiver on the hook. “Party line,” he said.

The country was filling up with people he didn’t like. He’d have to put on another shift, at tins rate, to be satisfactorily nasty to all of them.

She finished the hamburger and put it in front of me. “No coffee. You want a coke?”

“All right,” I said.

She opened one and put it on the counter, and then turned and went back through the doorway without a word. He leaned on the other side of the counter while I ate. He didn’t say anything. It was all right with me. I was caught up on his conversation.

When I had finished I stood up and took the wallet from my pocket. “How much?”

He shook his head. “Just settle up for the whole thing when you leave.”

“Might as well keep it straight as we go,” I protested. I had to get a look at that cash drawer tonight.

He shrugged. “Okay. That’ll be—let’s see—forty-five cents.”

I took out a five. He lifted a cigar box from a shelf under the counter, set it on top, and lifted the lid. There were four or five bills in it, but I couldn’t see them all clearly. He glanced at the five in my hand and shook his head.

“You got anything smaller?”

“I’ll see,” I said. I brought out a single. “Better give me a packet of cigarettes while you’re at it.”

He turned to get them off the back shelf. I shot a hand into the cigar box and spread the bills out. There were two fives and several singles, plus

some silver.

There was no twenty, new or otherwise.

He gave me my change. I went out, drove the car up alongside the end cabin, and carried my gear in. It took me only a few minutes to unroll my bedding on the lumpy old mattress. I switched off the battery-operated camp lantern and lay down. Mosquitoes whined thinly around my ears in the dark as I lay there smoking a cigarette. Frogs kept up their chorus along the shore and I heard a feeding bass splash somewhere out in the lake.

Money? Out here? I must be crazy.

But where had those two twenties come from? Right here, hadn't they? I'd seen them myself; there was no doubt of it whatever. Then I cursed softly and crushed out the cigarette. The whole thing was utterly absurd. Was I seriously expecting to find some connection between this mean and primitive little backwoods camp and the mystery of the slightly fantastic Bill Haig?

## Four

They'd have called him Mad-dog Haig except that his first name was William. Wild Bill was inevitable then, but inaccurate, at least by connotation. The suggestive flamboyance of it as applied to race drivers and stunt men was no more descriptive of Haig than it would have been of the cold and vicious deadliness of a cobra. He was an atavism. He belonged back with the Machine-gun Kellys, the Pretty Boy Floyds, and the Dillingers of the thirties. He was the embodiment of violence. The odd part of it, though, was that until the time he flamed across the front pages two years ago at the age of twenty-six his only criminal record was that of a petty hoodlum arrested and convicted once for stealing cars. Apparently he had simply gone berserk, but berserk with a paradoxically calculated violence that was aimed at one thing: knocking off banks, and big ones.

In that brief period of six months beginning in August 1953 he and his gang had robbed three big-city banks by direct and brutal assault. Firepower and blind luck had got him out of all three of them, but it had been gory and not even very profitable until the last one he hit. He seemed to know nothing about banks and their protective devices, and to care even less. Planning apparently had no place in his *modus operandi*; he simply went in and then shot his way out. The first one, in St. Louis, had resulted in the death of a teller and a bank guard, and had netted him less than nine thousand dollars. The second one was in suburban Detroit. It gained him eighty thousand dollars for a few short minutes until the gang member carrying the majority of the loot was shot down in the street outside the bank in a gun battle with police. Haig and the other two escaped with something like fifteen thousand dollars, leaving behind them a dead patrolman and another with a bullet-shattered hip. The outcry in the newspapers crescendoed.

It was in Sanport in February that the realities of life in the 1950s with their police networks, F.B.I., co-operation, protective alarm systems, and

traffic clogged streets and highways caught up with him at last. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say they caught up with his gang. He hit the Gulf First National with three other men. They killed another guard, wounded a bank official, and looted it of nearly a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. The whole thing caved in on him then, as anybody would know it inevitably had to, and the getaway became a shambles. They left the first member, Red Jolley, on the steps of the bank with a police bullet in his abdomen. The driver of the getaway car was shot through the head in the first block. The other man in the front seat shoved him out of the door and took the wheel. Haig was in the back seat with the bag containing the loot. Twenty minutes later, on the outskirts of the city but still inside the crystallizing ring of roadblocks being set up by the police, the getaway car slammed into the rear of a slow-moving truck at better than sixty miles an hour. Both vehicles careened across the dividing line into oncoming traffic, involving two other cars in the smash-up before coming to rest. Police were swarming all over the scene in slightly more than ninety seconds. The driver of the getaway car was still behind the wheel, dead of a broken neck. Haig; Haig was nowhere.

It was as if he had calmly stepped from the wreckage and boarded a flying saucer for Mars, carrying the bag of loot with him. Nobody saw him. The money was gone. Nobody had ever seen him again, to this day. That was a year and a half ago.

It was not so much that it was impossible he could have escaped in that ninety seconds of wild confusion as it was just unthinkable he could have got completely away and continued to elude the vast and continuing search for him that was still going on eighteen months later. There was simply no place he could hide. He was too hot for the underworld to touch with a barge-pole. He was a cop-killer, and he was on the F.B.I.'s "most wanted" list. He couldn't have bought protection or concealment from anybody with any kind of money, with ten times the amount he was carrying.

And they knew everything about him that there was to know.

Red Jolley had lived long enough to talk. He told them who Haig was and where he'd come from. The F.B.I., had gone on from there and when they were through they could have written a six-volume biography of him. They had photographs, descriptions, fingerprints, and a dossier on his personal habits all the way from his preferences in girls down to the way he

liked his eggs for breakfast. His picture had been on the front page of every newspaper and displayed on the walls of every post-office in the country. And it had all come to exactly nothing. Haig had, to all outward appearances, evaporated. Along with the entire haul from one of the biggest bank robberies in history.

I lit another cigarette and lay looking up at the dark, aware again of the fantastic impossibility that this could have anything to do with him. But, damn it, the facts were there, and they were incontestable. I lined them up in my mind.

One. That money had never been found.

Two. The fact that they were still looking for it proved that. It also proved that at least part of it was identifiable.

Three. Those two twenty-dollar bills were too obviously identifiable, on the evidence. The F.B.I. was trying to learn where they had come from. And they had shown me Haig's photograph, among others.

Four. Those two bills had come from here.

But where was the connection? Haig was from San Francisco. He was a city boy. He wouldn't be able to survive all day in this wilderness swamp, even if he'd been able to get here, and even an idiot would have better sense than to try to hide out in an environment as foreign as this. He'd stick out like Anita Ekberg at a Hottentot fish fry.

What did you come up with? There were several good strong probabilities, and the first of these was that Haig was dead. If he were still alive the F.B.I. would have found him before this. But that only made the mystery worse. Why hadn't his remains turned up? Even his dead body would be so hot it was practically radioactive. And that still left the utterly baffling question of how that money had wound up here—that is, those two twenty-dollar bills. Suppose somebody had come into possession of it through some set of circumstances as yet unknown; wouldn't even a sub-human intelligence grasp the fact that there might be just a touch of the unusual about a suitcase full of money lying around that way and that he'd better be careful where he tried to spend it? So why two brand new and consecutively numbered bills of that denomination in a place where a twenty of any kind would attract attention?

But, wait. She'd said she had spent the night in town. Maybe she had got the money there. No. That didn't fit. He'd told her to pick up the motors, so

he must have given her the money with which to pay for them. That brought it right back here again. And there were only two possibilities.

Either the Nunns had that loot themselves, or somebody who did have it had spent part of it here. You almost had to eliminate Nunn; he'd been a peace officer and if he were trying to pass off hot money he'd do it where it wouldn't leave such a clearly marked trail. He'd realize the dangers inherent in the whole thing.

I grinned in the darkness as it suddenly occurred to me that in all these suppositions and theories I had taken it for granted that anyone stumbling into the orbit of that missing bag of loot through no matter what set of unusual circumstances would automatically be another crook who'd try to cash in on it, instead of an honest man who'd merely call the nearest cop and turn it in. This calm assumption was clearly based on Godwin's Law of Character Erosion, which states that the attrition of honesty varies inversely with the square of the distance and directly with the mass of the temptation.

I tried to think of some way of pumping her as to who had spent those two twenties. But no matter how obliquely I went at it I'd arouse suspicion. The circumstance of my showing up here for the first time within hours of her visit to the store might look a little odd in itself, without doing anything else to attract attention. It was a long time before I went to sleep.

The sound of a car driving into the clearing waked me just at dawn. I looked around the interior of the crude little cabin. It was roofed with corrugated sheet metal and its flooring was of splintery, unfinished pine planks. Aside from the bed the only furnishings were a sheet metal stove for heat during the duck season and a wooden packing box on which stood a pail of water and a wash-basin. I hurriedly washed my face, dressed in khaki fishing clothes, and went outside with a dixie cup of water to brush my teeth. It was one of those rare combinations of time and place that always made you a little sad at the thought of dying and never seeing its like again. There was an almost poised stillness about it, as if the day were waiting to explode. The surface of the narrow inlet, walled in by high-crowned and shadowy timber, was unbroken and dark, and little feathers of mist curled off it to hang suspended against the backdrop of the trees. Before me and a little to the right eight or ten skiffs were moored to a float that ran out from the shore like something lying on a mirror. Everything was wet with dew.

The man who had driven up in the car had apparently gone into the main building. I went over and entered. The lantern was burning again, its white light issuing from the doorway to blend with the gray tones of dawn. Jewel Nunn, in shorts and a man's shirt, was frying eggs on the grill. She glanced up sullenly as she heard the screen door open, and I saw that her eyes were puffy and faintly red as if from sleeplessness or crying. Nunn himself was taking some spinning lures from the showcase. He nodded curtly. The other man, presumably the one who had called last night, was sitting at the counter. He turned his head to look around at me. I didn't know him. He was a slender, graying man in his fifties, neatly dressed in pressed khakis that obviously were not his standard garb. A doctor, you would have said, or perhaps an attorney, or bank official.

He nodded pleasantly. "Good morning."

"Good morning," I said. I sat down on the stool at the left end of the counter and ordered some coffee and two eggs. We ate silently.

The other man finished and paid for his breakfast with a dollar bill. Nunn came out of the doorway leading to the rear. He was carrying a small outboard motor.

"You about ready, Godwin?" he asked.

"No hurry," I said. "Just tell me which boat."

"What kind of motor you got?"

I nodded to the one he was carrying. "Same thing."

"Take number six then."

He and the other man went out. I heard them collecting gear from the car as I finished the eggs. I stood up and took a five from my wallet, moving along the counter until I was standing over the cigar box as she made change. There was only the same money in it there'd been last night. Well what had I expected? The whole thing looked silly.

I went out. It was fully light now. I went back to the cabin and draped my bedding over a wire outside between two trees so it would sun during the day. I unlocked the station wagon and carried the motor down to the float. Nunn and his passenger were loaded and apparently ready to go, but he was fiddling with the motor. He looked up and nodded to a skiff that had a crudely painted numeral 6 on the bow. I clamped the motor on the transom and lit a cigarette before going back for my tackle.

When I came back and began putting the stuff in the skiff they were still sitting there. The gray-haired man was looking impatient, but he said nothing. Nunn appeared in no hurry to start; he was still puttering around the motor and bailing out the skiff. When I had my gear loaded he made a couple of half-hearted pulls with the starter rope.

“I thought you overhauled these motors,” he said with a sour glance in my direction.

“We did,” I said. “Try opening the shut-off valve.”

He grunted and turned it. On the next pull the motor took hold. “Follow us if you want to,” he said, throttling it down so he could be heard. “Best fishing is up where we’re going.”

“Thanks,” I said, wondering at this burst of generosity. His passenger was paying for his guide services; it was a little strange he’d offer them to me for nothing.

They started up the inlet between the walls, of trees. I cranked the motor and followed, with no intention of sticking with them all the way up. I liked to fish alone, aside from the fact it was discourteous from a sporting standpoint to freeloan where somebody else was picking up the tab for the guide.

Javier was not a single large lake in the accepted sense of the word; it was rather a lake system. The only open body of water of any size was at the lower end, an expanse of fairly shallow water perhaps a little less than a mile wide and only slightly longer. Beyond that it was a vast network of sloughs, channels, and swampy areas in heavy timber, all connected by waterways passable to outboard craft. Some of the sloughs and channels were quite extensive, running up to a quarter mile in width. I wasn’t afraid of becoming lost: years of hunting and fishing had made me at home in this kind of terrain, and in my tackle box I carried a large-scale county map that showed it all in detail. We came out of the inlet into open water, keeping close to the weed beds and old snags of trees along the eastern side. The sun was not up yet, and the air was cool and fresh. Once I saw a flash of white in the edge of the timber as we startled a deer drinking in the shallows. The swirls of feeding bass could be seen now and then among the pads.

Nunn veered off to the left and entered a channel in the upper end. I continued straight ahead. In a few minutes I cut the motor and let the boat drift as I began setting up the fly-rod. I was near the north end of the open

water myself, but to the eastward of the channel in which Nunn and his passenger had disappeared. Directly ahead another winding and timber-walled channel came in, bearing off to the north and east. The boat came to rest and I shipped the oars, kicking it ahead now and then between casts into pockets among the pads off to my left. After five minutes nothing had struck the silvery streamer fly I was using, so I removed it from the leader and fastened on a green, cork-bodied popping bug. I dropped it in a small opening thirty feet away, twitched the line to make it gurgle, and a bass smashed it, erupting from the water with a head-shaking leap as I set the hook. I worked him away from the pads, wore him down, and slipped the net under him to work the hook out of his mouth. I lost the next two, and then landed another which I also released. For a half hour I gave myself up wholly to the sheer joy of fishing, and the baffling riddle of those twenty dollar bills was gone from my mind. The sun came up and it began to be hot. There was no breeze at all and the surface of the lake was like glass.

As abruptly as it had started, the fishing went dead. I changed lures a half-dozen times with no success. I stopped casting, and just as I was lighting a cigarette I heard an outboard motor somewhere to the northward of me. Nunn, I thought. Apparently he wasn't finding the fishing any better and was moving around. Then I became aware the sound was coming from the channel directly ahead of me. I looked around over my shoulder and saw the boat as it came into view around the first bend. It was a skiff with a small outboard. There was one man in it. He came on out into the open lake, changed course slightly, and passed about seventy-five yards away, headed toward the inlet at the lower end where the camp was located. I waved, and he lifted a hand momentarily in greeting, a small man in overalls and a big, floppy straw hat. It wasn't a rental boat; all of Nunn's were green. Probably a local, I thought; he apparently had no fishing gear with him. A few people lived up there in the swamps, mostly muskrat trappers and perhaps a moonshiner or two.

I took up the rod again and went on fishing, but I was only going through the motions now, while my mind returned to the same old questions. The sun grew brassy, and was reflected with an eye-searing glare off the surface of the lake. After a while I saw the man in the big straw hat come out of the inlet in his boat, headed back up lake. He went past some fifty yards off, lifted his hand in a brief greeting, and entered the channel

from which he had come in the first place. He had what appeared to be a carton in the forward end of the skiff. Shopping, I thought, remembering the small stock of groceries they kept at the camp.

The morning dragged on. I had a few desultory strikes from panfish, but the bass had apparently gone to sleep for the day. I began to be thirsty. This was a waste of time; the whole thing was stupid, anyway. Just what I expected to find? And how? The absurdity of it caught up with me and I cranked the motor with a feeling of disgust. Go on back to town and forget it.

I headed down lake and looked at my watch as I entered the mouth of the narrow inlet. It was after eleven. Returning to town now after reserving the cabin and boat for two days was going to look a little odd, but I'd just say I didn't feel well. What difference did it make, anyway? I cut the motor and began gliding up the float in the shade of the trees along the bank, and in the sudden silence I thought I heard a car somewhere out in the timber beyond the clearing. It sounded as if it were going away, and then it faded out and I wasn't even sure I'd actually heard it. I made the skiff fast to the float and started to loosen the clamps to remove the motor from the transom. Never mind, I thought; it could wait. Right now I was too parched and dehydrated to think of loading the station wagon before I'd had something to drink.

The somnolent hush of midday lay over the clearing. I crossed to the large building and entered. Jewel Nunn was sweeping the floor of the lunch-room. She turned, with something tense and apprehensive about her face, but it was gone instantly when she saw who I was. "Oh," she said.

I wondered what she had been afraid of. And why had she kept her back to the door, if she *were* afraid? She certainly must have heard me stepping up on the porch.

"You have anything cold to drink?" I asked.

"Just cokes," she said.

"I'll have one. And a glass of water, if I might."

She went around behind the counter and opened the icebox. I tried again to think of some way of broaching the subject of those twenty-dollar bills without causing her to wonder why I'd ask about an odd thing like that. There didn't seem to be any. Maybe I was slowing up.

She uncapped the bottle and poured me a glass of water from a jar in the icebox. I took a long drink of the water and then began on the coke. She started to return to her sweeping. I took out my wallet and extracted a ten-dollar bill, intending to settle up for the cabin and boat.

She glanced at it, and reached under the counter for the cigar box. Setting it on top, she opened it and glanced inside. "Haven't you got anything smaller?" she asked.

She thought I merely wanted to pay for the drink. I started to explain I was leaving, but then it occurred to me I ought to take one more look into that box before committing myself. That was what I'd come out here for, wasn't it? I moved a casual step nearer and glanced down.

There was no twenty in it, new or old. Besides the silver it contained only some ones, a couple of fives, and a ten. Well, I asked myself disgustedly, are you satisfied? Ready to go home now?

"I wanted—" I began, and then stopped suddenly, my eyes riveted on the ten-dollar bill. It was on top, in plain sight. And along one end of it was a narrow, reddish-brown stain.

## Five

Maybe it had been there all the time. The only thing I'd been watching for was a twenty, so I could have overlooked it. No. I thought swiftly. Last night there had been nothing in that box except ones and fives. This morning the other fisherman had paid for his breakfast with another single, while I'd given them a five.

Somebody had come in here and paid for something with that ten, receiving one of the fives in change. *And it had been this morning.* I could feel the hair prickle along the back of my neck.

“Haven’t you got anything smaller than that?” she asked again.

I snapped out of it. She was staring at me curiously.

“Oh, I said. I poked a hand in my pocket and found a quarter. “Here you are. And give me another one while you’re at it. I’m really thirsty.”

I still had my own ten in my hand when she turned to open the refrigerator. It took only a fraction of a second to drop it in the box and pick up the other one. When she swung back around I was putting it in my wallet. I put the quarter on the counter and she gave me a nickel from the box in change, entirely unaware of the switch. There was no reason she should notice it; that stain was so narrow along the end you’d never pay any attention to it unless it had some significance for you. I was wild to examine it, but it’d have to wait. Right now there was something more important.

I sat down on one of the stools and took another drink of the coke. She walked back to where she’d left the broom leaning against the wall near the small window at the end of the room.

I lit a cigarette and swung around on the stool. “Did you ever model clothes?” I asked.

The broom stopped. She turned. “No. Why?.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. The way you walk, perhaps. You never had any training at all?”

She shook her head. Her eyes watched me, but you couldn't read anything in them. "What made you think I had?"

I gestured with the hand holding the cigarette. "Form. Line. Flow. Call it anything. Look. Walk over to the door and back."

Her eyes were hard and suspicious at first, and I thought she was going to tell me to go to hell. She didn't, however. She leaned the broom against the wall and did as I said. I watched her. She'd had some natural grace to begin with, but now it was all broken up and jagged with self-consciousness. Well, I'd make her self-conscious.

"Bring those feet together!" I snapped. "What are you doing, straddling a fence?"

She stopped and gasped.

I didn't give her a chance to say it. "I *am* sorry, Mrs. Nunn," I said hurriedly. I smiled, and held up a hand in a mock gesture of defense. "Look, I mean . . . Forgive me, won't you? It just slipped out. It's a hard thing to explain. . . ."

"What do you mean?"

I shook my head and smiled at her again. "I'm sorry I barked like that. I didn't stop to think. But look at it this way: the impact of a minor flaw in anything is intensified in direct proportion to the flawlessness of the rest of it. You understand, don't you?"

"I'm not sure," she said.

She wasn't sure of anything now. Any of them over the age of three can see through flattery the way you can through a pane of glass—when they want to. But they can't cope with a change of pace. Destroy their frame of reference just once and they never get oriented again, especially if you keep crossing them up.

You could see her deciding things were getting out of hand and that it was time to blow the whistle. "Well!" she said. "I must say you've got a nerve."

When retreat is indicated, attack. *Toujours l'audace*. It can get you many a fat lip, but plenty of times it'll work, if you know precisely where to stop the offensive. I fastened the slow stare on her, starting at her ankles and going north across the long bare legs and the denim shorts, the sucked-in waist, the curves at the front of her shirt, and finally coming to rest on a

white face and a blazing pair of eyes. It was deliberate, and infuriatingly obvious. She drew in a sharp breath.

“Oh,” I said in sudden confusion, as if it had just dawned on me. “Please, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way at all. It was just the reverse, in fact. I was imagining you in an evening gown.”

She circled this warily, looking for a place that wasn’t loaded.

“Women who can wear clothes,” I said, “look so wonderful wearing them.” I stared at her thoughtfully and then went on,

“Whenas in silks my Julia goes,  
Then, then, methinks how sweetly flows  
The liquefaction of her clothes”

“What’s that?” she asked wonderingly.

“Robert Herrick,” I said. I picked up the other bottle of coke and walked casually over and put it in her hand. She looked up at me a little cautiously, still trying to figure it out. I left her standing there as I strolled over to the screen door and stood gazing idly out at the sun-blasted clearing.

“This is a beautiful place here,” I said.

There was no answer for a moment. *Whoever it was in that car*, I thought, the one I’d heard as I came up to the slip. But maybe there’d been somebody here before that.

“Why . . .?” she asked behind me. “I mean, what was that you meant about my feet?”

“I wish you’d forget that,” I said. “It was nothing, really, and I’m sorry.”

“But why did you say it? Most women walk with their feet about that far apart. Don’t they?”

“That’s right,” I said. “And on most women it doesn’t mean a thing.”

“Why?”

“Because they walk like pack animals to begin with.”

“Oh . . .”

I turned then and grinned at her. “I know you must think I’m crazy. I’m sorry. I didn’t have any right to make personal remarks like that. But it’s just—well, you’re touchy about the things you’re sensitive to, that’s all. I happen to think tall women are very beautiful to look at when they move right, and too few of them do. So meeting one who does is apt to be a little

startling. You can put your foot in your mouth before you think, if you're not careful."

"Oh." She thought about it for a moment, and then she said, "Well, it really wasn't anything to get mad about, anyway. Was it?"

She made no move to return to the sweeping. The sullenness had disappeared; there was something almost pathetically wistful in the way her face was opening up and in the tentative friendliness of her voice.

You're a dirty son of a bitch, I thought.

\* \* \*

Her name was Jewel Tennison before she was married, and she was twenty-four. She had lived all her life in Exeter, the county seat, except for one whole year with an aunt in New Orleans when she was about twelve. Her mother and father were both dead. She had a brother who lived in California, in Barstow. No, the name wasn't spelled like Lord Tennyson's. She remembered about him. She'd had him in high school. That was with a "y," wasn't it? They'd had a house in Exeter, nearly half paid for, when he lost his job in the sheriff's department, and they'd sold it and bought this camp. She had also put in twelve hundred dollars her mother had left her. She had been a drum majorette in high school and she missed television out here. They could probably put up high enough an antenna to get the two Sanport channels, but there wasn't any electricity. She liked *I Love Lucy*.

No, she'd never thought about her hands that way. It was awful the way dishwater made them so rough, but she hadn't paid much attention to the way they were made underneath. Did I really think they were expressive? Where had I learned to notice things like that about women, little things like their hands and the way they walked? Not *that way* about the way they walked—she knew I didn't mean it like that. It was different, kind of, wasn't it? Most men just—well, you know.

No, she didn't like fishing. The fish themselves gave you the creeps. They felt cold, and scaly. You know. And they'd fin you if you didn't watch out. She swam a little, but there were water moccasins in the lake. She'd played tennis some, in high school, but she didn't think women should take athletics too seriously. They got muscles. Nobody liked women with muscles. Especially in their legs.

Oh? Well, uh—I mean, thank you. It was funny, wasn't it, the way I could say things that should make you mad but they didn't really, somehow. They just didn't seem fresh, the way I said them. Oh, then maybe that *was* it. Just the way you would admire any other work of art, like a poem, or a symphony? She'd never thought of it that way. But I was just teasing her now, of course. *Work of art!* But it was nice, the way I said things.

She didn't talk about Nunn. I noticed it. From the depths of that sullenness she was slowly drowning in she was capable of making the crack about "being a trusty," of making it to a total stranger, but now it was different. It wasn't an act, really, I thought; when she was talking to somebody who took the trouble to recognize her as a human being, the hard shell of churlishness and defiance softened and she was no longer bound by that Procrustean compulsion to trim all her utterances to fit it. I doubted very much that she was any longer in love with Nunn, but when she was opening her petals this way and feeling good inside she realigned herself with the soap opera dogma that you didn't discuss your mate with outsiders, no matter what kind of a sad bastard he was.

There was no difficulty in reading between the lines, however. She was dying out here. She was going crazy with loneliness. The trees were closing in over her and burying her alive. She was starved—not love-starved, at least in any physical sense, for you felt Nunn would collect his marital accounts-receivable as they fell due even if he probably did approach the bed with the subtlety and finesse of Machine-gun Kelly looting a bank—but just starved for companionship and understanding and perhaps a little gentleness. One tender gesture, I thought, would buy you a season pass. Not here, probably, and certainly not now in broad daylight, but it could be arranged. However, that was a matter to be shelved for possible future consideration; right now all I was after was information.

No, their business was mostly just fishermen. Some of them came and stayed three or four days, and a few hired George for a guide. The groceries were mostly for people who liked to go on up the lake and camp out for a day or two while they fished, but once in a while they did sell some to the people who lived around in the bottom, mostly when they ran short of something and they didn't want to make the long trip in to town. Like this morning. One of the Hildebrand boys had driven over for a can of baking powder and some evaporated milk. Yes, just before I came in.

*Keep going, honey.*

Up on the road out of the bottom, and one of the boys had a dog named Trixie? No, that wasn't the Hildebrands. Those people were named Sorensen. The Hildebrands weren't really boys, they were grown men, actually, twins, about twenty-three or twenty-four years old, and meaner than cat's milk. Their names were Jack and Judson. Judson had been in the penitentiary for cutting a man up in a fight. They lived over on the west side of the lake with their father and they raised ribbon cane that they made syrup out of in the fall, and lots of people thought they made moonshine, too, all the year around. No women at all; neither of the boys was married, and their mother was dead. They did their own cooking, and it was probably pretty bad. Maybe that was what made 'em so mean. Did they trade here much? No, very little. They didn't get along very well with George. They went to town every Saturday and the old man made them buy the groceries and put them in the car before they started getting liquored up and looking for a dance where they could start a fight. . . .

The Hildebrands didn't sound too promising. They wouldn't have spent as much here as those two twenties, to begin with. And if they'd got hold of a lot of money suddenly in some way, the F.B.I. wouldn't have had any trouble finding it out long before this. There'd have been a steady stream of it being loosed on the countryside through cat-houses, beer joints, and crap games, not to mention large amounts through fines for disturbing the peace. Granted, one of them *had* been in prison, but where was the connection with Haig? Of course he'd been in the sneezer once himself, but that was two thousand miles away in San Quentin.

*But who was left? The man who had passed me on the lake? No one else?*

The upper end of the lake? Yes, there were a few people living up there, mostly men, but you didn't see much of them. Except that weird one, of course. And he was gone. But really gone. No, he hadn't moved away; not that kind of gone. In fact, he was down here this morning. I might have seen him pass in his boat. What she meant was weird gone. You know, not quite right. Oh, he was harmless, and you felt sorry for him, but there just wasn't any sense trying to talk to him. Yes, he was around a lot. He came down about twice a week after his groceries and his comic books. . . .

*Comic books?* I remembered them then. So that was why they were here. Well, you could certainly scratch him. But, God, there must have been somebody else. I went on listening; maybe she would come up with the right one after awhile.

George called him Two-Gun, but his real name was Cliffords. She thought it was Walter Cliffords, or was it Wilbur Cliffords. Well, it didn't matter, anyway. Even to him. About half the time he thought he was Sergeant Friday and then for a while he'd be Wyatt Earp. When he was Wyatt Earp he wore a big straw sombrero and a gun-belt and holster with a six-shooter. . . . Yes, a real one. George said it was a .36 or a .38 or something about that size. He shot snakes with it. He'd been up there for years, as far as she knew. Used to work for the Southern Pacific, didn't he, or something like that—anyway, he had a disability pension and he didn't do anything but hunt and fish all the time, living alone like a hermit, and it was no wonder he was a little, well, you know. It must be a pretty good pension, too, because it was actually a fact he must buy at least twenty or thirty dollars worth of comic books and true detective magazines from them every month, to say nothing about his groceries and the shotgun shells and bullets for the thirty-six to shoot snakes with, and he always paid for everything with a ten or twenty dollar bill. You'd think, wouldn't you, that with plenty of money to live on that way he'd want to be in town where he could have a television set and civilized people to talk to. . . .

If you live out of your hat for a sufficient number of years, you develop another sense. It's a little like a built-in Geiger counter that can trip itself and start clicking faintly even when the rest of your mind is half asleep, and after a while you learn to heed it. I heard it now.

. . . and somebody to look after him, the poor old man. He really was nice, even if there was never any sense to the way he talked, and she felt sorry for him. She always tried to get him to drink a glass of fresh milk when he was down here, if they happened to have any, that is, and if George wasn't around. George called him Two-Gun and made fun of him. But when you thought about it, if he wanted to live up there by himself, it was his business, wasn't it? She'd live in New Orleans, herself. It had probably changed a lot since she was there when she was a girl, but it was the most wonderful place. She remembered she used to go down along the river and look at the ships from all over the world with flags she didn't even

recognize. Of course, being so young, she hadn't been in any of the night clubs or the big restaurants, but she had heard about them. . . .

Mr. Cliffords? Oh, sure; she could understand how a strange case like that could intrigue you if you were interested in people. No, she was sure he'd been up there longer than just a year, or a year and a half. Of course, *they'd* only been here a little less than a year themselves, but she knew definitely he'd been living there three years at least because it was about that long ago when George had met him for the first time. He had come out here in the swamp to arrest a Negro who'd killed another man for—well, you know, running around with his wife. He'd come across Mr. Cliffords then and he'd told her about it when he got back to town, about the funny character who'd wanted to go along and help him round up the Negro and had used funny words like posse, and police cordon, and apprehend the killer, and so on. It was a real scream, George said. It was three years, all right; she knew because it was just a few months after she and George were married.

His age? Oh, he was pretty old. Forty-five or around there. No, he hardly ever went to town. Maybe just once every two or three months to cash his pension checks and buy what few clothes he needed. No, he had never asked them to cash one, but it seemed like the man who'd had the place before did say something about cashing one for him now and then if he had enough money on hand. His mail? Oh, it came in care of the camp, at the rural mailbox out on the county road. He never got anything, though, except the checks. They came in a long envelope with the name of the railroad on them. She thought it was the Southern Pacific. He probably didn't have any kinfolks at all, the poor old thing.

When he did go to town he came down the lake in his boat and hitched a ride with George. His cabin was a mile or so above the road that came into the upper lake from the highway, but the road wasn't open except when it had been dry for a long time, and he didn't have a car anyway.

She poured two cups of the coffee she'd been making as we talked, and came back and sat down again. We were swung around, facing each other across the stool in the middle. I was on the left hand one, with my back to the door.

She took a sip of the coffee and smiled. "I ought to get back to work," she said. "I don't know when I've talked so much."

“I’ve enjoyed it,” I said. “Very much.”

I took out cigarettes, wondering how to get her started on Cliffords again, and offered her one. We leaned toward each other as I held the lighter. She was quite pretty, I thought, the way she was now with that warm friendliness in her eyes.

Then her face froze up as suddenly as if I’d hit her. She was looking over my shoulder. I turned just as Nunn pulled open the screen and stepped inside. He must move like a cat, I thought; neither of us had heard him come up on the porch.

I nodded, lit my own cigarette, and snapped off the lighter. “How’s fishing?” I asked, wondering why he was back this time of day. I hadn’t even heard the boat come into the inlet.

He stared at me. For a moment I thought he wasn’t going to answer. Then he said, “So-so. And how’s it been with you? You catching a lot of fish?”

“I had a little luck at first, but it died out.”

“Maybe you just give up too easy. Or do you?”

She had said nothing at all, and I was conscious of the tension in the room. There was ugly feeling about it, as if it could blow up if anybody made a bad move.

He stared bleakly at the two of us and then at the coffee cups. “I wonder if I could trouble you to go get that box of shear-pins?” he said to her. “That is, if you think you could spare the time.”

She got up from the stool without a word and disappeared through the doorway behind the counter. The silence she left behind her would have been awkward if it had been two other people. We cared so little for each other it didn’t seem to matter.

“You people do a fine job of overhauling motors,” he said.

I stared at him coldly. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“Sheared a pin.”

“I gathered that,” I said. “But just what do you think those pins are in there for?”

“Forget it, forget it,” he growled. “You got your money, what do you care?”

“If the pin didn’t go you’d tear up the propeller when you hit something, or bend the shaft.”

He struck a match on his thumbnail and lit a cigarette. "Yeah? They're supposed to have a friction clutch that'll slip."

"The new ones do," I said. "Not the old models."

"Sure. Sure. I knew you'd have all the answers. I've had nothing but trouble with those motors since I bought 'em."

I finished the coffee, put a dime on the counter, and stood up. "Try taking care of them," I said. "It helps."

I started for the door. He moved aside grudgingly. You could see he was looking for trouble, but he wanted me out of here even more. It was all right with me; I had other things to do myself.

"You don't want anything else?" he said.

I stopped and turned, looking into the bleak hatchet face from a distance of about two feet. "No," I said. "I don't think so. Why?"

"I just wanted to be sure. That's all right, ain't it?"

"I guess so," I said.

I went on out and crossed the sun-drenched clearing to my cabin. The argument about the motors was a phony. He probably hadn't even sheared a pin, or if he had he'd done it on purpose for an excuse to sneak back. He was spying on her. Or on me.

I wondered why. Did it have something to do with the thing that'd brought me out here? Or did he simply believe *she* was the thing? It might figure that way, to a mind like Nunn's, and the way he'd acted all along seemed to bear it out.

Well, if he wasn't sure he was keeping her at home, that was his hard luck, not mine. I had other things to think about, such as the fact that while this whole thing might have appeared to be mildly goofy to begin with it was now completely insane.

You had all these pieces of evidence. They interlocked. You put them all together, and you had the answer. So what was it?

One of the great police organizations of the world was shaking down North America trying to find the loot from a bank robbery, while some dreamy birdbrain in his second childhood was serenely buying comic books with it.

Move over, Cliffords, I thought. I'll bring up an armful and we'll trade. Dibs on Superman.



## Six

I cut the motor and came to rest beneath dense overhanging foliage along the bank. It was a little after one p.m. I had come over a mile, I thought, since entering the mouth of the winding waterway up which Cliffords had gone with his boat, and I could as well be lost in some remote back country of the Amazon drainage. No sound broke the stillness of midday. The channel, about a hundred yards wide at this point, materialized out of the timber a quarter of a mile behind me and disappeared around another bend just ahead.

I opened the tackle box and unfolded the large map of the county. Here was the channel I was on; it was the easternmost arm of the lake, next to the highway and roughly paralleling it at a distance varying from two to three miles. I was about—say, at this point on it. Now. There was the access road coming in from the highway. It turned off the road a mile or so south of that tricky S-bend.

I sat still for a moment, frowning thoughtfully at the map without actually seeing it. What the devil was it? I shrugged, and lit a cigarette. It didn't matter. Now, here. The dirt road, merely a thin line on the map, dead-ended on this channel. I glanced at the scale at the bottom of the map and estimated the distance. Say another four miles. And beyond it somewhere was the shack Cliffords lived in. She'd said a mile or two; I wondered if she had ever been up there herself.

I put the map back in the box and took the ten-dollar bill out of my wallet. It was an old one, creased and limp from the thousands of hands it had been through and like any one of a million others except for that narrow stain along the edge at one end. I compared it with the twenty. The stain was exactly the same color, a reddish shade of brown, and it was on only that one place. Why never anywhere else? There was one very good answer to that, I thought, and the picture it brought to mind made my skin prickle with excitement. Wherever it had been to pick up that discoloration, there

had been a lot of it, stacked in bundles so that only this edge was exposed to the contaminating agent. You didn't need a doctorate in physics to realize that a mere handful of banknotes, thrown loosely into a box or something, seldom stood on end of their own volition or stuck straight out from the side with no support. I moistened a finger and rubbed it along the stain; it smudged slightly and a faint trace of it came off. It was the same stuff.

Then I snorted. Precise chemical analysis by the Godwin laboratories. Millions of compounds were water soluble, and the minute dried crystals of practically any substance could be dispersed and spread with water. I was chasing moonbeams, and when I caught a sackful I'd build an arc light.

Cliffords was absurd. This entire thing was absurd. It almost had to be Haig, or Haig's ill-gotten swag, that they were seeking, because he was the biggest crime story, and the most baffling one, of the past decade, and because they had shown me his picture. So where was the connection between that coldly violent killer and this harmless old pixie getting his kicks out of space ships and Peter Rabbit? Why, of course, I thought sarcastically; you could see the tie-in almost immediately. Cliffords had at one time been an employee of the Southern Pacific Railroad, and Haig was born in California. Fool-proof, wasn't it? And to narrow it down even further, they each had one left hand. Or at least, I supposed they did, or had.

Look at it, I thought. Cliffords was already living up here alone in this isolated backwater before Haig had even begun his fantastic career. I'd established that. Haig would be twenty-eight now; Cliffords was forty-five, or around there. There could be no family relationship, or even nodding acquaintance, between the two; anybody Haig had even borrowed a match from in the past ten years had been run down and checked out by the F.B.I.

So what did you have? You had nothing.

No-o. Not quite. No matter how fantastic it was, you still had the almost dead certainty that this derailed leprechaun was spending Haig's money.

I cranked the motor.

Around each bend the next reach lay glaring and empty under the sun, as devoid of any signs of life or human habitation as the last. After about thirty minutes I began watching the right-hand shore for the end of the road. I spotted it shortly, an opening in the trees where the bank had been cut down into a sloping ramp for launching boats off trailers. There were the remains of several old campfires, but no cars were visible. I slowed a little and

began keeping a lookout for the cabin or a boat landing. A little over a mile ahead as I came around a bend the channel spread out to some two hundred yards in width and ran straight for almost a mile with an extensive bed of pads along the left side. About half-way up it I saw what I was looking for. A skiff was pulled up on a shelving bit of beach in a small cove on the right. The motor was tilted up on the stern. Cliffords wasn't in sight, but as I went past I had a glimpse of weather-beaten gray back among the trees. That would be the cabin.

I went on without slowing. He would probably hear me, but there would be nothing strange about an occasional fisherman going by. I cleared the next bend and continued another mile or two before I cut the motor and set up the fly-rod again. An hour went by as I fished with indifferent success, merely going through the motions. I refilled the motor from the fuel can and started back. The skiff was still in the cove. I didn't see Cliffords anywhere. He probably took a nap this time of the afternoon, or caught up on his reading.

I wound on down the channel until I was sure he could no longer hear the motor. The new models are a lot quieter than the old ones used to be. Just before rounding the last bend approaching the camp-site and launching ramp at the end of the road I cut the motor and swung into the bank where the limbs of a large tree overhung the water. Working the boat back under the screen of foliage, I made it fast, and stepped out.

There was no trail. I kept open water in view from time to time as I slipped through the underbrush and timber. It was intensely still and very hot now, and my shirt became soaked with perspiration. An outraged blue jay called me a Sunday driver and expressed his doubts as to my legitimacy, and once I flushed out a wild sow with a litter of pigs. About twenty minutes later I swung to the left again and eased back out to the lake shore. Not far enough; I was still south of the last bend. I went on for another two hundred yards and tried once more. This was fine. I was just past the bend and I could see most of the long reach spread out ahead of me and to the right. The cove where his boat was beached was on this side, of course, and hidden because of the angle, but it didn't matter. If he came out, I'd see him. I sat down in the shade with my back against the trunk of a tree, and lit a cigarette. It was ten minutes past three.

There was no guarantee, of course, that he would go out. With 365 days a year in which to fish if he wanted, he probably took a day off now and then. Well, if he didn't leave the place, there was nothing I could do about it; I'd just have to try again tomorrow.

An hour dragged by. Mosquitoes buzzed around my face. I smoked more cigarettes, being careful to throw the butts in the water. This was an occupation for a grown man, I thought with disgust; why didn't I go on up there and join him and we could take turns being Dick Tracy? Of all the stupid. . . .

I heard his motor start. He came out of the cove and headed this way. I stepped back a little further from the bank. He cut his motor and came to rest almost opposite me, near the beds of pads along the other shore. He set up a casting outfit and began fishing, kicking the boat along with the oars now and then. Good.

I faded back and turned, hurrying now. In a few minutes I came up in back of the clearing. I stopped short, studying it intently as I remained motionless in the edge of the timber. Nothing moved anywhere. The two unpainted old buildings slumped dejectedly in an attitude of timeless and perpetually arrested collapse, lying partly in shadow now as the late afternoon sun slanted across the trees on my right. The far one, and the larger of the two, was the cabin itself, roofed with split oak shakes and sitting on round foundation blocks sawn from logs. A section of rusting stovepipe extended above the roof here at the rear and was guyed with baling wire. The one small window I could see was open. There was no door in back. The other building, a small shed about the size of a one-car garage, was nearer and to my right. Weeds were grown up around the rear of it. I could see no window, but presumably the door would be around in front. I went carefully back over the ground again, searching for a dog or for any evidence of one. There was none. Of course, he might be in the cabin.

I slipped noiselessly up to the rear window and peeped in. There was only one room, and it was empty. Opposite me was the door, which stood open. I could catch glimpses of water beyond, through the trees. Hurrying around the corner, I cased the terrain in front. The cove, where he kept his boat, was about fifty yards away. I could see only patches of the lake beyond, in the direction where he was fishing, but it was all right. He

should be good for an hour or two, and I'd hear his motor if he started back. I stepped inside.

It was not very large, perhaps fifteen by twenty feet, with small windows on three sides and the one door here in front. In the rear there was a wood-burning cookstove, a woodbox, a pine table, two chairs, and a large wooden case covered with oilcloth which presumably served as a cooking table and sink because it was littered with dirty dishes. Some shelves along the wall held a supply of staple groceries and some dishes and cooking utensils. A frying-pan and two large pots hung from nails driven into the wall above the stove. At the right in the front part of the room was an unmade bed, while on the left was an old chest of drawers whose veneer was peeling, a table, and a trunk. A pump shotgun and a .22 rifle stood in the corner next to the trunk.

Everywhere you looked, on the table and on the trunk, under the bed, and piled on the floor around the sides of the room, were stacks of old comic books and cheap true crime magazines whose covers ran largely to toothsome and improbable girls who had died violently in attitudes calculated to display the optimum expanse of thigh. The floor hadn't been swept for some time. I looked around at the dirty dishes and the rumpled bed. Well, I hadn't come out here to inspect him for a Good Housekeeping seal of approval.

I started with the chest. On top of it there was nothing except a folded towel and a pair of thick-lensed spectacles. I slid out the top drawer. There were some handkerchiefs in it and his shaving gear and a small mirror, and two boxes of .38 caliber ammunition. Two envelopes bore the printed return address of an office of the Southern Pacific Railroad. They had been opened, but through the glassine windows I could see there was something still inside. Maybe the checks came with a voucher attached; I'd be able to find out just how large the pension was. I was reaching for one of them when I spied the corner of his wallet sticking out from under the handkerchiefs. I hurriedly slipped it out and flipped it open. It held seven ten-dollar bills, a five, and four singles. But not one of them had a stain along the edge. There was simply no trace of it at all.

I felt suddenly let down and cheated. Taking the tens over to the window, I turned them carefully in the light, examining them all over. It was no use. They were just like any of millions of others. I shrugged, and

returned all the money to the wallet. There was no identification in it except an old New Mexico driver's license that had expired in 1953. It was made out to Walter E. Cliffords, and gave an address in Lordsburg. He was five feet six inches tall and weighed 152. Hair, br. Eyes, bl. He was born in 1910.

I dropped the wallet back in the drawer and reached for one of the envelopes. When I slid the voucher out, I gave a little start of surprise. The check was still attached to it. It was the same story in the other one. I rooted among the handkerchiefs and came up with one more. The checks were all in the amount of \$58.50, payable to Walter E. Cliffords, and he hadn't cashed one since May. He must be popular with the accounting department, I thought. And suffering from no shortage of money, in spite of the fact she'd said he spent nearly half that amount on comic books and magazines each month. Well, he might get something from Social Security . . . no, you had to be sixty-five, didn't you? One thing was clear, however; his finances didn't ring true at all.

The other two drawers held nothing but clothing. I closed them and turned to the trunk. It wasn't locked. Lifting off the stacks of magazines, I raised the lid, conscious of a strong odor of moth crystals. The compartmented tray on top held a hodge-podge of miscellaneous stuff, shotgun shells, plastic boxes of bass flies and spinning lures, gun-cleaning equipment, some bottles of old patent medicine, and another pair of spectacles in a case. I lifted it out and set it aside. The bottom was full of winter clothing. I snatched it all out, feeling in the pockets of the jackets and the raincoat. There was nothing else in it except some magazines lying on the bottom.

Well, what now? I shook my head, still crouched on my knees beside the trunk and staring musingly into its emptiness. There should have been something. Something besides you, honey, I thought.

The uppermost magazine was another of those true detective things. On its cover a creamy-textured and extremely loth maiden in a Place Pigalle outfit was trying to stay at least one jump ahead of a hearty type with a cleaver. Ah, youth. *What mad pursuit? . . . What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?*

Wait a minute . . . I frowned thoughtfully. *Why in the trunk?* He must have a half-ton of these things stacked around the room; what was special

about this one? I grabbed it up. There were two more under it, another crime magazine of a different brand and one of those pocket-sized digests that can reduce Gibbon to four hundred words. I felt the stirrings of an illogical excitement; here I was going back into left field again. The digest magazine displayed its table of contents on the cover. I ran my eye down it rapidly. Half-way down I stopped.

*Wild Bill Haig, Enigma.*

So?

I dropped it and began leafing frantically through one of the crime books for its table of contents. There it was. I gulped it at one devouring glance, and drew a blank. Was I wrong again? I started back, more slowly. *Girls in Purgatory . . . Clue of the Bloodstained Something . . . Ice-Cold Blonde . . . Nude Something Or Other . . . Is This Man Among the Living? . . .*

Hold it. Try page forty-three.

I found it, and then breathed softly. It was Haig, all right. The next one was easy; it was the lead story. *Will They Ever Solve the Mystery of Bill Haig?*

I don't know, pal, but give me a little time; I'm working on it. I closed the magazine and dropped it softly back into the trunk.

I put everything back in the trunk the way it had been, closed it, replaced the magazines on top, and went to work. I tore the rumpled bed apart and turned and probed the mattress and pillows. I pulled the drawers out of the chest and looked under and in back of them. I looked in the stove, and pulled the pots away from the wall to see behind them. I tore the piles of magazines down and shuffled them. Every few minutes I stepped to the door to check the cove again, and then returned to the methodical ransacking. I was careful to put everything back the way it was, but I missed nothing. I even went through the groceries and pried the lids off three one-gallon pails of syrup. It was a complete blank. The only money in this cabin was that in his wallet.

Of course it was too big to hide in a place like this. That was obvious, but he should have *some* of it here where it was convenient. If I could just find one of those twenty-dollar bills—then I'd know. After all, the magazine articles could be a coincidence. Maybe he idolized criminals, or collected Haigiana the way some people collected data on Sherlock

Holmes. Hell, there could be half a dozen good explanations for it. I had to find something more concrete.

I went around back and entered the shed. There wasn't too much light, even with the door open, but my eyes gradually became accustomed to the dimness. One side of it was stacked with stove-wood. There was a bench on the right that held the remains of an outboard motor, a five-gallon can of fuel, and a dozen or so beat-up old duck decoys. A pair of oars leaned against the rear wall. The floor of hard-packed earth, under close scrutiny, showed no indication of having ever been dug up. An old hunting coat hung from the wall above the bench. I took it down and went through all the pockets. I was working against time now, beginning to feel jittery as I listened for his motor. What about the wood? There wasn't time to tear all that down and get it piled back. I'd just have to return tomorrow. Was there anywhere else? I looked swiftly around. nothing remained except the underside of the bench. Sitting, I slid back under it and looked up. The light was too poor here to see much more than its general outline. I fished the lighter from my pocket and flipped it, holding it above the level of my eyes, and then the sudden intake of my breath made a little gasping sound in the stillness.

The framing of the bench was of two-by-sixes, a long one across the front and shorter ones running from front to back between it and the wall. To the bottom of a pair of these, at the front of the bench, a short section of plank had been nailed, forming a pocket that was accessible only from down here. And sitting in the pocket was a small cereal carton. I snatched it down and slid from under the bench.

My lips pursed in a noiseless whistle as I lifted them out. They still had the paper bands on them, two blocks of tens and that sheaf of brand-new twenties. Intense excitement was running along my nerves as I stepped quickly to the door and shot a glance down toward the cove. I couldn't see it, because the cabin was in my line of sight. But hell, I'd have heard the motor, wouldn't I? I forgot him, having eyes now only for these three bundles of currency. The twenties and one pad of the tens were marked with that telltale rusty stain along the bottom edge; the other block of tens showed no trace of it. I smiled. I had everything now that I need to know, except where it was actually hidden, and that I'd find out. But first I had to stop them.

I shoved the twenties in my pocket, put the tens back in the carton, and replaced it under the bench. Just as I was about to straighten, I heard him. And he wasn't out on the lake in his boat; he was in the cabin.

What I'd heard was the rattle of a stove lid. I cursed myself for a fool; why hadn't I had sense enough to realize he might fish all the way back to the cove and not start his motor at all? Could I get out? It would be risky, but still possible. The door of the shed was in plain view of the rear window of the cabin, but I could make it if I watched my chance. I eased up to the door and peered out. Then icy gooseflesh prickled across my back. He had come out of the cabin and was just rounding the corner, headed this way. He was coming to the shed for wood.

There was no way out. I whirled, searching frantically for a place to hide and knowing there was none except the ridiculous and almost certainly futile gesture of crawling under the bench. I dived under it and squeezed as far back into the corner as I could go. He came in. I could see his legs, almost to his hips, and I could see a little of the barrel of that .38 sticking out of the holster swinging against his thigh. He was Wyatt Earp. I held my breath, and prayed that if he looked around under here I wouldn't remind him too much of one of the Clanton boys.

He was picking up wood and piling it into his arm. I could have touched him. I stared with horrible fascination, and then looked away and tried not even thinking. He might feel the stare, or hear the thought.

He went out.

I was weak as the tension snapped, and I wanted to sit there and rest. Instead, I forced myself to slide noiselessly from under the bench and peer out at him. He was almost to the corner. He was turning it. I moved. Two steps out the door and a hard turn to the right and I was going around the side of the shed that was away from the cabin. I was in back of it and safe when I heard the wood fall into the box as he threw it down. I sighed. There was nothing to it now; all I had to do was fade back into the timber while keeping the shed between me and that window.

When I got back to the boat the sun was far down and the waterway was in shadow. Squatting on the bank under the trees, I hurriedly slipped the twenties from my pocket and counted them. There were forty-seven. It was even better than I'd dared hope. There was only one outstanding and unaccounted for.

The percentages were in my favor. If he'd spent it in town he'd done it more than three months ago, because he hadn't been there since. The Nuns didn't have it. And if they'd had it and spent it, there was a good chance the continuity of ownership was showing a blank spot or two somewhere along the line because otherwise the F.B.I. would be here sitting right in my lap at this moment.

I slipped seven of them into my wallet with the one I already had. Then, sliding over a little until I was right on the edge of the bank where it dropped off into the water, I began crumpling the rest and placing them in a little pile. The last one I folded lengthwise, twice.

I'd always wanted to do this, just once. Putting a cigarette in my mouth, I flipped the lighter, ignited the end of the folded bill, and lit the smoke. Then I shoved the torch into the pile and puffed contentedly as eight hundred dollars flared up and burned to ash. I very carefully brushed all the residue off into the lake, and then threw a bailing can full of water over it to be sure. Cranking the motor, I looked at my watch.

It was a quarter to six. With a little pushing, I should be able to make it to Exeter before that north-bound bus went through for Kansas City and Chicago.

## Seven

Nunn and his fisherman hadn't come in yet, and I saw nothing of her as I made fast to the float. I shaved and changed clothes, and walked across to the lunch-room. It was empty. "Mrs. Nunn," I called.

She appeared in the doorway. There was something withdrawn and distant in her face as she saw me. I had the impression she wished I'd go away.

"I just wanted to tell you I was going into town for dinner," I said. "Is there anything I can get you?"

She shook her head. "Thanks, I guess not. Are you going to fish tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said. I started out.

"I . . ." she said. I turned again. "I'm sorry. . . ."

I'd already forgotten the unpleasant scene at noon, but no doubt it'd been a lot rougher on her. She had to live with the surly bastard. I smiled at her. "Forget it. I shouldn't be hanging around here interfering with your work, anyway."

She made no reply. When I went out she was still looking after me. I drove out of the bottom and over to State 41, where I turned right. Exeter was about twenty miles to the south. It was the largest town in the area, a county seat of about twelve thousand. I bought a cheap money clip in a drug-and-sundries store that was still open, and drove over and parked near the bus station. Folding the eight twenty-dollar bills plus a five and a couple of singles of my own, I clipped them together and shoved them in my pocket. It was after dark now. When the north-bound bus came in I walked through the waiting-room and out into the ramp. It was a rest stop; the driver and most of the passengers got out. I went aboard and sat down about two-thirds of the way back. Easing the money from my pocket, I set it on the floor and pushed it under the seat ahead of me with my foot. Nobody was paying any attention to me. I sat there a few minutes longer and then

made the startling discovery that I was out of cigarettes. I got off, went back through the waiting-room, and returned to the station wagon. I was sitting there smoking ten minutes later when the bus pulled out. The chances were very good it wouldn't be discovered until the bus was serviced and cleaned at the end of the run, either in Kansas City or Chicago. A hundred and sixty-seven dollars with no identification attached packed the court rather heavily in favor of Godwin's Ruling on Treasure-Trove, so it'd probably get back into circulation without disturbing the lost-and-found department. It couldn't do any harm, and if it worked it would materially ease the F.B.I. pressure around here. I had to have time, and this was one way to buy it.

Cliffords was going to notice those twenties had disappeared, but it couldn't be helped. I knew a little about that F.B.I. outfit and how it worked; they didn't do anything half-way. Right now this whole countryside was alerted and they were poised and watching. Let just one more of those bills stick its head out and the game was over. There really wasn't much Cliffords could do, anyway, except to move the tens to a new hiding place, which was all right with me. I wasn't after them. And if he got worried enough to go back and reassure himself about the real cache, so much the better. So far I hadn't come up with any plan at all for finding that, but having him beat a path to it would make it a lot easier.

I drove back to the lake. The same old futile merry-go-round started again in my mind, but I shut it off with irritation. It was utterly impossible to explain how Cliffords had got that money, but I no longer had to. I knew he had it. What else mattered? You didn't deny the existence of something just because you couldn't account for it, did you? You accepted Time, and invented clocks to measure it, without the faintest idea what it was, and you went right on living in spite of the fact that nobody had ever come with an explanation for Life.

The sheer magnitude and the excitement of it began to catch up with me now, for the first time. Up until a few hours ago it had been an intriguing puzzle, an abstract sort of thing whose fascination was inherent in the problem itself rather than any concrete expectation of gain. You didn't really believe it; you couldn't. In your heart what you actually believed was that the separate scraps of evidence added up to an answer that was incompatible with the whole, and you were interested in learning why. But now . . .

It was money—tangible, real, concrete. A fortune. A fantastic amount of money. There was no longer any doubt he had it because I had seen the clinching argument—those ten-dollar bills. The twenties could have been merely thrown away by Haig because they were identifiable and hot. But Cliffords had it all; he had it hidden somewhere in something that was rusting. All I had to do was find it. Nobody would ever know I'd got it. I had the intelligence and the will-power to destroy any part of it that was even conceivably identifiable and to refrain from making any display of wealth too suddenly. I'd go to Florida and go into the boat business in a small way, expanding gradually. Boats I knew, liked, and understood; the business was booming all over the country. I'd own a marina. . . . I stopped.

That was what I owned now, wasn't it?

*Hah!*

I swung off State 41, headed for the camp, my mind furiously at work. The thing couldn't take too long; at any time Cliffords could go back and dig up some more of it, and when he did there was a chance he'd wind up with another bunch that could be identified. It was only a miracle he'd got by with it this long. He was erratic, too potty and unpredictable to be trusted with a thing like this. One slip would blow it up. He might talk, start bragging, or begin playing the girlie circuit in the sawmill towns around here. He was only forty-six, and with unlimited funds at his disposal he might decide to ditch the comic books for grown-up toys, just had to beat him to it, by finding it. Sure, that was all. *But how?*

\* \* \*

It was four in the afternoon. I stood in dense timber a half mile behind his cabin and wearily lit a cigarette. Since seven this morning I'd been back here, searching, walking, crisscrossing, studying the terrain, and gradually having it brought home to me just what I was up against. Sweat drenched my clothes; the air was stifling, and all about me was the silence of the big woods. I sat down on a log and took the folded map from my pocket. It was roughly two miles this way; call it ten to twelve north and south. And that was only on this side of the *first* arm of the lake. Add in the country on the other side and the trackless maze of islands and swamp cut by the twisting channels of the waterways, and what did you have? At least fifty square

miles of wilderness. It could be anywhere; he didn't have to hide it under his pillow. And just how sure could you be that he hadn't sunk it in a watertight container in the lake itself, somewhere in those God-only-knew how many thousands of acres of isolated inlets and sloughs and weedbeds?

Well, one way to locate it was to keep watch on him until he went to it himself; he would sooner or later. So? Just move out here? It could be weeks, or months. I was married; I was supposed to be running a business. If I could get out here once a week without arousing suspicion I'd be lucky.

There was always the third method, of course, but I shrugged it off impatiently. You could either do that sort of thing, or you couldn't, and there was no point in considering something you wouldn't have the guts to carry out. I wasn't trying to take a bow; there was no moral issue involved. It was merely an appraisal. You had to be sick in the head so you enjoyed it, or you had to be completely without imagination, or fanatic. I failed on all three counts.

So there was nothing to do but go on looking. I did. A little before sunset I gave it up for the present and went back to where I'd hidden the boat. Nunn was on the float when I got to camp.

"Well, where's all the fish?" he asked.

"Still up there," I said. I unclamped the motor.

"Didn't you get nothing at all?"

"A few," I said indifferently. "Was I supposed to kill them?"

"I wouldn't know," he replied. "I'm not a big-time sport."

"Well, cheer up," I said. "It takes all kinds." I was getting little sick of him.

I packed my gear in the station wagon and settled with him for the cabin and boat. There was no pressing invitation to hurry back and sample his overflowing hospitality again, which was fine because when I did come back it would be in through that road to the upper lake and I wouldn't be bringing a brass band. I didn't see her until I was turning the station wagon to leave. She was standing behind the screen door looking out. I thought I saw her hand move, as if she had waved good-bye. I waved, and went on.

It was dark before I got out of the bottom. I went back the same way I'd come, northward on State 41. When I slowed for the S-bend I saw the white crosses again in my headlights and tried once more to put a finger on the thing that kept nagging me about the place. Wasn't it something about the

last accident? I knew the people involved—or rather Barbara Renfrew did. That was it. They were friends of her grandfather's, a couple around sixty years of age who'd lived on a farm just north of Wardlow. Their car had gone off the road one night in a heavy rain and they were killed instantly when it crashed into the trees out there. Barbara had taken time off to go to the funeral, but that wasn't all of it. It was something she'd said. I frowned, trying to remember. Wait. . . . Something about the wreck itself. She said she couldn't understand what they were doing on this road because it was out of their way. They were returning from Sanport.

So? But just when? I couldn't remember, except that it was winter before last. It could have been in February. I whistled softly.

I arrived in Wardlow at eight thirty. When I pulled into the drive I saw lights were on in the living-room and upstairs, so she was home. Let's see, where had we left off? I'd counterattacked along the left and my flank was holding, but there was no telling what she was moving up, or where. A great fighting animal, the female, I thought—tenacious and tricky as hell.

I carried the stuff in through the living-room. We apparently didn't have any company. That was nice; non-combatants and refugees were always a hazard. It took two trips. I was down in the den drying the fly-rod before putting it away when I heard her footsteps on the basement stairs. She appeared in the doorway. Over her nightgown she was wearing a robe of peach-colored mist, and she looked like the Sultan's favorite on the way in. She gave me a tentative smile.

“Did you catch any fish, Barney?”

“A few,” I said. “You look nice. I like that austere touch; reminds me of John Calvin.”

She grinned. She had a hell of a grin when she unsnapped the leash and turned it loose. “I was lying in bed reading when I heard you come in.”

Likely story, I thought. The calculated swirl of that platinum mop hadn't been near a pillow. “Books,” I sneered. “You egg-heads are all alike.”

Her face softened reflectively. “I'm sorry about the fight. I missed you, Barney.”

I put down the rod. “I missed you, too.” Then it occurred to me, strangely enough, that I wasn't even lying. I had missed her.

I moved, and she moved, and my arms had that ache in them as I tightened them around her. The big, vital, blonde face was under mine,

tilted back, surrendering and demanding at the same time, and I was kissing her too roughly. A little more suave in the salve, Godwin, I thought; you could make chairman of the board. Then I wondered why I never seemed to make sense any more, even to myself; I'd married her because she had money and I'd done nothing but bitch about it since. I was a melon-head.

I put my right arm down behind her knees and picked her up. She was a lot of woman, but the way I felt at the moment I could have carried her up six flights of stairs and through the roof like a berserk elevator. The eyelids parted just slightly and she regarded me roguishly from under the lashes.

“Do you think you’d better? It’s a long way up there.”

“To the kitchen?” I said. “I thought we’d scramble some eggs.”

She murmured a naughty word from behind the Mona Lisa smile and gently swung her feet. A slipper fell off. It was among the more unnoticed events of the year.

I was going through the living-room when I felt her begin to go rigid in my arms. “You don’t *have* to show off your strength,” she said. “I know you’re younger.”

Jesus, not now, I thought. “Shucks, ma’am,” I said. “It ain’t hardly nothin’ at all. Little ol’ triflin’ armful like you.”

“Don’t overdo it,” she said. “You’ll scare me. I’ll take your word there were no girls out there.”

I gave it the old fourth-quarter try. “Stop fighting me, you alabaster houri. I’ve got my arms full.” I kissed her, but it was all nothing now. She’d retreated into the cave to paw over her wrongs, whatever they were. Well, she’d certainly picked a strategic time for it. I went on up the stairs, feeling savage about it, and dropped her on the bed. She could go to hell.

“Well?” she asked sweetly.

“Well, what?”

“This is the old professional? Where’s the technique?”

“I lost my way,” I said. “We should have gone out and climbed on the back fence.”

“You *would* feel more at home there, wouldn’t you?”

“Is there anything else?” I asked.

“What?”

“It’s Thursday,” I said. “The help’s night out.”

She clenched her hands down by her thighs and looked up at the ceiling. "Go away," she said in a thin, quiet voice. "For the love of sweet Jesus Christ, go away. Go away, *go away*."

I went away. I drove over to the store, let myself in, and savagely attacked the accumulated paper work. There was usually some release and satisfaction in that, because I liked the place. I'd built it up to what it was. The first time I'd ever seen it, one afternoon a little over two years ago when I'd dropped in for some item of tackle I needed on a fishing trip, I had recognized its potentialities and it had interested me. She'd come in about that time to say something to the inept and lethargic old gaffer who was running it for her, and *she* had interested me even more. Well-to-do widows with sex appeal are rare enough to be collector's items in this vale of tears, and here was a real jewel. I gave her a good sales talk about what I could do with the place, quit the public relations outfit I was working for in Sanport at the moment, and moved in. Both phases of the project were wide open for an operator with any talent at all; inside of sixty days the business was in the black and I was in her bed. Four months later we were married. Not that she was particularly a patsy; but we did hit it off well in the hay, and she was in the market for a romantic and suggestively tragic figure who never talked much about his past. It's stock, but easy.

It was ten p.m. when I ground out the last of the letters and finished checking the receipts and making up the bank deposit. I slammed the door of the safe and stood for a moment looking around the dim interior of the showroom. Mrs. Jessica Roberts McCarran Godwin, I give it to you. Cherish it, and guard it well in that old classic repository of the fervent resignation and the disenchanted farewell. From now on I'm just going through the motions here while I look after Godwin's future. And no motions at all at home. Put it away, dear Mrs. Godwin; you had your little revenge and I'll admit it was a nice piece of strategy, but it works only once in this league.

The drug store was still open. The copy of that digest magazine Cliffords had in his trunk was the current issue, and I found it on the stand. I drank a coke while I read the article about Haig. It could be, I reflected thoughtfully; it was a million-to-one shot, but it was probably the only thing they'd never thought of. I got in the station wagon and drove out to the cemetery just north of town. The night was dark and there were no houses

within a half-mile; I had it all to myself. I took a flashlight from the car and went through the gate.

Grayson? No-o. Greggson. . . . That was it. It took about ten minutes to find the double headstone. I splashed the light against it and felt a surge of excitement as I read the date.

I could quit worrying about that part of it. I knew now how Cliffords had got that money.

\* \* \*

I left the house before she got up, and had some breakfast in town. Otis was parking his car at the side of the store when I arrived.

“How was the fishing, boss,” he asked.

“Poor,” I said. I opened the front door and we went in. “Those jokers probably got their bass somewhere else. Never believe a fisherman.”

“Who does?” he said. He leaned against the showcase and lit a cigarette. “Say, where’d you stay up there?”

Dan Cahoon’s fishing camp was the obvious answer, since it was the only good one, but that warning bell went off in my mind just in time. “Oh,” I said. “Some little place on the west side. Why?”

“Man came in yesterday and made us an offer on those two reconditioned fifteen-horse jobs. Said he’d take both of ‘em if we’d cut the price fifty dollars. I tried to get hold of you at Cahoon’s, but they said you wasn’t there.”

That was too close for comfort. “I started there, but decided to try a new one. In this business, the more camp operators you know, the better.”

Careful. Don’t explain too much. Never, never do that. “Did he say he’d be back?” I went on.

Otis nodded. “Today or tomorrow. And, by the way, that F.B.I. man—what’s his name? Ramsey. . . .”

“I think it was Ramsey,” I said casually. I reached inside the showcase and straightened a display card of brass spinners. For Christ’s sake, *what about him?* “Something like that. Why?”

“Oh, he was in again, looking for you.”

“He was?” I asked. That was all I could manage.

"Yeah. You know, boss, that must be something really hot they're working on."

Don't mind me, Otis; don't let me hurry you. I love these rambling dissertations. What do you think of T. S. Eliot? "You say he wanted to see me?"

"Yeah. He just wondered if you ever remembered who gave you that new bill."

"No," I said, breathing again. "It throws me."

He leaned his elbows on the case and frowned at the cigarette in his hand. "You know, I was just thinking. I mean, about that twenty. You remember those two motors we fixed for Nunn . . .?"

I was beginning to feel limp. Torquemada lost a good man when Otis blundered into the wrong century. "What about them?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Probably nothing. But he must have picked 'em about Saturday, because I noticed Monday they was gone. The bill would have been over twenty dollars, and he's got a pretty sad reputation for being mixed up in anything crooked that's going on. It's just a shot in the dark. . . ."

And Ramsey was here pumping him. I lit a cigarette for myself.

". . . I didn't think of it till after the F.B.I. man had left, but you might mention it when he comes back. I think they're still around here, a couple of 'em. They're making every place in town."

Is this the last trip, Otis? You're sure you don't want to feed me through the rollers again? I frowned thoughtfully at my own cigarette, since that seemed to be what they were doing now, and said, "No. Wait. I think *she* came after those motors. His wife, I mean. Early Monday morning, before you got here. Seems to me she gave me a check."

Was that too risky? It would be if it got as far as Ramsey, but not if I stopped Otis here and now. "Yeah," I went on. "I'm pretty sure of it. Signed her own name to it. Her first name, I mean. Janice? Jeanette? No. Jewel. That was it."

"Oh." He shrugged. "Well, it was just a thought. Guess it's about time to check in at the salt mine. You got your whip and the leg-irons?"

You're not really going to get off my back and go to work, you cadaverous ray of sunshine? "Strength, comrade," I said. "Soon comes the day."

The morning passed in a blur. I waited on people automatically, going through the motions like a machine while my thoughts raced along an endless treadmill. The F.B.I, must be swarming in on this place like an air attack; it was just a miracle I'd got those twenties shut off in time. But maybe I hadn't; there was still one more floating around somewhere. One could do it.

How was I going to find it, something no larger than a two-suiter bag in over fifty square miles of wilderness? It was impossible. No. For over a hundred and sixty thousand dollars, nothing was impossible. But it wouldn't be that much, I cautioned myself. Some of it would be in securities I'd have to destroy; more would be like those twenties—too risky to pass. But there still could be over a hundred thousand of it. But where? Think of it—fifty square miles. Thirty-two thousand acres of timber and underbrush and swamp.

Otis went out to lunch. When he returned, I started out. The phone rang before I could get in the car. I went back. Otis had answered it and was holding out the receiver as I came in the door. "For you, boss."

"Thanks," I said. He went back toward the shop.

"Mr. Godwin?" It was a woman's voice. It was Jewel Nunn.

I wondered if she had told Otis who she was.

## Eight

“Oh, hello,” I said. “How are you?”

“I hated to bother you,” she said hesitantly. “But yesterday when you left you forgot to pack one of your shirts.”

“Well, thanks a million for calling,” I said. “Just throw it in a corner somewhere, and the next time I come out I’ll pick it up.”

“Oh, I’ve got it with me.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in Hampstead, at the drug store. I had to come in to buy some things, and I thought that since I’d be this near to Wardlow I’d just bring the shirt along. I could leave it here—or if you’ve got a few minutes to spare you could meet me here and I’d give it to you.” She sounded faintly embarrassed, as if she’d got involved in that rigamarole of explanation and couldn’t find any way to turn it off.

Hampstead was fifteen miles south of town, where you left the highway to go to Javier Lake. It was silly to drive down there and back just for an old khaki shirt, but there didn’t seem to be any graceful way out of it. Then it occurred to me I might learn a little more about Cliffords if I talked to her. I was going to need all the information I could get.

“Sure, I’ll be right there,” I said. “It’s awfully nice of you to go to all this trouble.”

I called to Otis to take over, and hit the highway out of town. Less than twenty minutes later I was in Hampstead. It was a village with a population of less than a thousand, in a tomato-growing community. The highway bypassed it at a distance of about half a mile. There was a big packing shed near the railroad tracks and beyond that a cluster of buildings about a block long that comprised the business district. It was quiet and half asleep in the white sunlight of noon. I saw her old station wagon parked on the left in front of the grocery, directly across the street from the drugstore. I pulled into a space beyond the drugstore and was just getting out when I saw him.

There were a few people on the sidewalks, mostly farmers in khaki and overalls and a teen-age girl or two in jeans, but this one was no tomato-grower. He'd just come out of the hardware place at the corner on the other side of the street and was lighting a cigarette while he studied the other store fronts along that side. He was wearing a snap-brim Panama and a gray suit and had a thin briefcase under his arm. He *could* be a salesman, of course, but even at a distance of half a block you could see that young, alert, well-pressed neatness of the F.B.I. agent written all over him. They must be taking this end of the country apart. I hoped that bundle I'd put on the bus would start hitting the Kansas City or Chicago banks in a few days; they were making me nervous.

I pushed open the screen door of the drugstore and went in. A couple of old-fashioned overhead fans moved sluggishly, faintly stirring the air. At the left two teen-age boys with gooey concoctions before them slouched on stools and sprawled against the soda fountain like melting wax figures. There was a counter and a prescription department at the rear, and three booths on the right, behind the magazine stands. Most of the floor space in the center was taken up with racks holding cosmetics and candy and other assorted merchandise. She was in one of the booths, watching the door. Her eyes lit up and she gave me a faintly embarrassed smile.

I walked over. "You look very nice," I said, smiling down at her. She had on a crisp summery dress with very short sleeves and a lacy spray of white at the throat, and this time she'd done a better job with the lipstick. A narrow blue ribbon passed under the cascade of tawny hair and was tied with a little bow at the top of her head. It made her appear younger, not more than twenty at most. "The shirt is in that paper bag," she said awkwardly. It was on the table before her, with a couple of other small parcels and a half-finished lemonade.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" I asked. "After all, I do want to thank you."

"Oh, of course," she said. "I mean—please sit down. But I'll have to run in just a minute."

She was as transparent as glass, a basically nice kid sticking her toe in the water and then drawing back in alarm. It wasn't me, particularly. It was the bleakness of her life in general. Probably anybody who bathed as often as once a week and didn't scratch himself in public could score with any

one of the standard approaches if he'd merely take the trouble to restore her faith in her own desirability. She'd called me, and now by God it was up to me; she wasn't sure, either, just how much she wanted to happen, but it *would* be nice just to be able to use some of the old defense patterns again, if nothing else.

It was interesting, but I had other things on my mind. And at any rate if I *were* looking around for somebody else's patio to play in, it probably wouldn't be Nunn's. The silly bastard might blow your head off.

We engaged in the usual inane small talk for a few minutes, and when she started gathering up her packages and said she had to go I merely thanked her again for bringing the shirt.

"I'll go out to the car with you," I said, helping her with the parcels.

"Thank you," she said. "But there's one more thing I want to get, if you don't mind."

I followed her as she prowled among the stands of merchandise. In a moment she found what she was looking for, a bottle of scented bath oil. Just as we turned to take it back toward the clerk at the cash register in the rear, I saw the man in the gray suit come in the door.

He came back too and stood waiting at the counter beside us while the woman clerk was winding up a transaction with another customer off to our left. I was standing between him and Jewel Nunn and perhaps a half-step behind them. He put down his briefcase. She set the bath oil on the counter and started opening her purse.

At that moment the pharmacist came out of his cubbyhole and said inquiringly, "Yes, sir?"

The man pulled out the little black folder I'd been sure he had, flipped it open, and said, "I'm from the Federal Bureau of Investigation . . ."

It unfolded then like some horrible and unstoppable nightmare. I saw it before she even put it down, and recognized it for what it was, but I was frozen. The clerk was coming from the left. It lay there on the open counter, not fifteen inches from the corner of his briefcase.

"I'd like to speak to the owner . . ." he was saying.

*He hadn't seen it.* He was looking at the pharmacist. The clerk was almost here. I snapped out of it then, at last.

"Here, here," I said chidingly, grabbing up the bill at the same time. "Put your money away. It's the least I can do. . . ."

I grabbed her purse and stuffed it inside and closed it. He was still talking; he hadn't even looked around. I felt limp.

"Why, Mr. Godwin, I couldn't. . ." she began.

"Don't be silly," I said, smiling at her. "I was just wondering how I could thank you." I tossed a five on the counter for the clerk.

But what now? My thoughts were racing as I went on exuding the old Good-time Charley from every pore. I hadn't solved anything yet; she still had it.

"But you didn't have to do that," she said uncertainly.

"Hush," I said, smiling. "I'm doing this. Suppose you wait outside and stop giving me so much trouble."

"But why?"

"You'll see." I gave it the old masterful touch, taking her by the elbow and pointing her toward the door. She went on out, still not too sure about it.

The clerk had finished wrapping the bath oil and was getting my change. The F.B.I. man and the pharmacist had gone into the back. I glanced swiftly around, searching for something. It had to be small. Then I saw it in the showcase. That would do nicely.

"I'll take one of those small bottles of Escapade," I said to the clerk. "And gift-wrap it, please."

I dropped it in my pocket and went out carrying the bath oil and the paper bag that held my shirt. She was putting her packages in the station wagon, across the street. I went over and set the bath oil in the seat and held the door open for her. She got in, and started to say something.

I shook my head at her and then looked down at my hands on the door. "Listen," I said quietly. "On your way home, about two miles out of town, there's a little road that turns off to the right in the trees. . . ."

"No," she said. "I—I couldn't."

I raised my eyes to hers then. "Please," I said earnestly. "I only want to talk to you. Just this once, and I'll never ask it of you again."

She hesitated. She wanted to, but any time they did this sort of thing in a soap opera it bitched up the works in a frightful fashion.

"Don't say anything now," I said. Just think about it. I think you'll see there's no harm in it. I did want very badly just to talk to you for a few minutes. If you're there, it'll be wonderful; if you're not—well. . . ." I

spread my hands in a gesture of resignation and went back to the car. She drove off.

I lit a cigarette and waited about five minutes. Taking out my wallet, I checked to be sure I had a twenty. I had three. Selecting the crispest and newest, I slid it in my trousers pocket with the small bottle of perfume.

I drove back out of town and turned right on the road toward Javier. She'd better be there; if she weren't, I was in a hell of a jam and had to think of something else, but fast. The next time she took that twenty out of her purse, anywhere within a hundred miles, the F.B.I. was going to fall on her like a brick wall. Where'd it come from, anyway? It was the last one, of course, but I'd checked then cash-box three times. Probably in her purse all the while, I thought. That hadn't occurred to me.

I came to the side road and swung into it. It was a pair of sandy ruts leading off through heavy pine. I couldn't be sure, but there didn't appear to be any fresh tire tracks in them. I came around a bend where there was a small open space in the shade of two large trees by a stream and when I didn't see the station wagon I knew I'd lost. She wouldn't have gone past here. Just to make certain, however, I got out and examined the ruts. Nobody had been through here for days. I cursed the perversity of all women. What was the matter with her? Did she think I was Jack-the-Ripper?

Well, what now? Come up with something, pal, and hurry. I stopped then, and turned. A car was coming down the road behind me. I sighed wearily. Well, they always had to dramatize everything.

She stopped and I walked over to the car. "I came back," she said. "I shouldn't have. But just this once . . ."

I opened the door and slid in under the wheel; she moved over to let me in. It was very quiet out through the trees. I put my elbow on the back of the seat and turned a little, facing her. She was staring through the windshield. I reached out and put the tip of one finger under her chin and turned her face, very slowly and gently, until it was just under mine. For a minute I didn't say anything; I merely continued to look into her eyes, and then at the rest of her face, and finally at her eyes again. She started to say something.

I beat her to it. "I know," I said quietly.

"We shouldn't be doing this."

“That’s what I mean,” I said. “We’re both married, and we’ve got no right to. But I just had to tell you—just this once and probably never again—how lovely you are. And that I think you’re very, very nice.”

“You do?”

I smiled faintly. “What do you think?”

Then I went on, “It’s a strange thing, but a while ago when that phone rang, I was thinking of you. You don’t know what it was like, picking it up and hearing your voice.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t tell you this, she said. “But I was hoping I’d see you again. That’s pretty awful, isn’t it?”

“No,” I said.

“But it is. And we can’t do it again.”

“Not ever?”

“No. You know that, Barney.”

I didn’t even know she knew my first name, or how she’d learned it.

“It’s not much fun, is it?” I asked.

“And this isn’t helping things any.”

“I know. You’re right, of course. It’s crazy, any way you look at it.”

“I’d better go,” she said dully.

“Right now?”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. Please. . . .”

“All right,” I said reluctantly. “But first I want to give you something.”

“I don’t think you should.”

“Hush,” I said. “It doesn’t amount to anything. I’ll put it in your purse, and you can just pretend you found it there, if you want to. But maybe you’ll remember me when you use it.”

The purse was lying in the seat on the other side of her. I reached over and picked it up. “Close your eyes,” I said.

She closed them. I opened the purse. The twenty was still loose in it, outside the billfold. I slipped it out quickly and replaced it with the one from my pocket. I dropped in the little gift-wrapped box containing the bottle of perfume, closed the purse, and set it in her lap.

“Now?” she asked.

“Almost,” I said. I put my hands up on each side of her face and kissed her very gently on the lips. “Now.”

She put her hands up over mine, pressing against them.

Her eyes opened. "I've got to go," she whispered. "I've got to, Barney, please . . ."

. . . *all we know of heaven, and all we need of hell,*" I said, softly. Oh, knock it off you lousy ham, I thought. You've got the twenty? what do you want to do, make a production of it?

"What is?" she asked.

"Parting," I said.

"Is it a poem?"

"Yes," I said. "Maybe it's not the parting she had in mind, but it can be rough enough."

"Good-bye," she said.

"All right." I kissed her again, and this time she cracked a little. She put her arms up about my neck and clung tightly for just an instant before she began pushing me away.

"You'd better get out now," she said, and there was a slight edge of raggedness to her voice. I wasn't getting off so lightly myself, after that deal last night, and I wondered what the percentage was in beating my brains out this way after I'd already accomplished the mission. Well, you had to follow through and lend it a certain amount of verisimilitude. I got out, a little awkwardly under the circumstances, and closed the door.

"I won't see you again?"

"Don't ask me to," she said. "I don't think I can trust you."

"Did you want to?" I asked.

She didn't say anything. She turned the station wagon around and drove off without looking back.

When the sound of her car had died away, I took the twenty-dollar bill from my pocket. It was exactly like the other two, brand new, with that line of stain along the edge. And it had been right there on the counter, almost under his hand. I shuddered.

Flicking the lighter, I touched flame to one corner and watched it burn. I ground the ash to powder in the rut and pushed sand over it.

There may be more of you, boys, I thought; but don't count Godwin out altogether. He has a number of assorted talents, and you can see he doesn't care how he uses them.

\* \* \*

When I got back to the store, Ramsey was in the office. He was as quiet and as courteous as ever, and the call was merely a routine follow-up, but in a little while I began to be afraid of him.

It did no good to remind myself that I'd committed no crime except that of withholding information, and that that wasn't remotely susceptible to proof because nobody else knew I even had the information. He scared me, anyway. It was the questions.

Why? I wondered. What exactly is there about a trained investigator that frightens you when somebody else asking the same questions would merely be a nuisance or a bore? It took me several minutes to isolate it, and when I did it was absurd—at first glance. It's simply that he's listening to the answers.

It's no more than that. In this antic bedlam of two billion people yakking all at the same time sixteen hours a day, a man who listens to the answers to his own questions can scare you. The tip-off is the complete, utter, absolute lack of any response at all to anything you say. He doesn't have time to respond; he's too busy listening. You say something. It doesn't merely rattle on his eardrums and cause him to say *Har, har, that's a good one*, or *Say, that's too bad, or Well, I'll be damned*. He absorbs it. There's no other word for it. He closes himself around it with the terrible silence and the impersonality of quicksand engulfing an unwary animal, and when he does, it's irrevocable. There's no use trying to tell him something else six months later, because he knows what you said the first time. And in the end, of course, if you're guilty of something, he kills you with simple mathematics. It's easy to make two answers jibe. Try ten thousand.

Then, I reflected, a tape-recorder should have the same effect. No. Not necessarily, but the reason for that was obvious. It was a matter of conditioning. In the twentieth century we accepted the miraculous as commonplace in the Machine, but we still expected Man to talk more than he listened. When he didn't, it was unnerving.

Well, I thought, shaking off the apprehension, I can still beat them. Simply because there is no longer any link at all between the inner track, where I'm operating, and the outer track where they are.

But a few minutes later when he stood up, gravely shook hands, and said, "We appreciate your co-operation very much, Mr. Godwin," I

wondered.

One of us was a sucker. Which one?

## Nine

I sweated it out all day Saturday, fighting my impatience, and didn't go back to the lake until Sunday. I had to be very careful now; any unusual behavior could be dangerous. Jessica watched me load the tackle in the car late Saturday night, and we spoke to each other for the first time in forty-eight hours.

"Do you really want to go fishing again?" she asked tentatively.

"Oh, I don't really fish," I said. "I wreath garlands in my hair and chase nymphs through the woodland aisles. Great for the waistline."

She turned away.

"And if you catch one," I added, "it beats a cold shower all to hell." The next time she married she might have better luck in finding somebody she could tease and get away with it.

I spent another night on my monastic rack in the den and left before dawn, picking up some breakfast, a thermos of coffee, and a sandwich at an all-night café on the way out of town. It was still short of sunrise when I turned off State 41 on to that access road into the upper lake and wound my way through the dim and lofty hush of the timber. It was slow going, because the road was almost non-existent, and in those two short miles the utter futility of it came home to me with a finality no longer to be denied. This was farcical. If I lived to be two hundred, I'd never succeed in locating it like this. You simply couldn't grasp the immensity of the place until you were out here trying to visualize finding something the approximate size of a suitcase not merely lost in it but deliberately hidden. It was hopeless this way. He had to show me where it was.

Sure, I thought. That would be the day. He might not go back to it for six months, and there was less than one chance in a million he'd do it when I happened to be around.

What, then? Just give up? Before I'd even tried? No, there had to be a way to do it; eventually I'd come up with it. I drove out of the ruts and hid

the station wagon before I arrived at the end of the road. On Sunday some fishermen might come in here, and there could always be one who might recognize it.

However, there were no cars at the camping area yet. I cut off through the timber, paralleling the lake shore, and before I reached the point I heard an outboard motor sputter and start. It should be his, I thought. When I came out to the water's edge where I could see the long reach in front of his cabin, a skiff with a solitary figure in it was going around the bend at the upper end. I went on up and sneaked a glance at the cove. His boat was gone, all right. I watched the clearing for a moment, just to be sure, but I had it all to myself.

I went around to the shed first. The two packages of tens were still there in the cereal carton; he apparently hadn't even discovered the twenties were gone. I replaced them and went into the cabin, looking aimlessly around and goaded by the futility of it. It wasn't here; I knew that, so what did I expect to find? An idea, I thought. I had to have some kind of plan. Nothing occurred to me. The place was just as it had been the other time, with the same general untidiness and sloppy housekeeping. There were more dirty dishes, most of the plates showing a residue of syrup in them. I remembered the three one-gallon cans of it I'd looked in before, and decided he must eat syrup on everything.

I went out, and around in back, stooping to peer under the cabin. It was more than two feet off the ground, and I could see all the way through. There was no indication the ground had ever been dug up. I was wasting time; why did I persist in looking around here when it could be anywhere in fifty square miles? Maybe that was the reason; the rest of it was so hopeless I didn't want to start.

I caught sight of something about fifty yards to the rear of the cabin in the edge of the timber, and walked back to it. It was his garbage dump, a small pile of empty tins and broken jars, old magazines, and ashes from the stove. I located a stick and began moving the litter enough to see the ground beneath; if you were going to bury something in the earth this would be a good way to camouflage it afterward. But there was no evidence the ground had ever been disturbed. I probed all around with the stick and found it solid everywhere. I sighed wearily and began pushing the cans and bottles

back the way I had found them. Then I stopped suddenly, staring at something on the ground.

I bent and picked it up. It was a piece of fire-blackened metal, small and vaguely cup-shaped. I recognized it instantly. It was the corner reinforcement off a cheap leather or fiber suitcase. I poked around with the stick some more. Within a few minutes I had scraped up parts of both the clasps, the lock, and one of the rings through which the end of the handle had fitted. Here was the final bit of proof, I thought—if I had needed any more. This was probably what was left of Haig's famous suitcase.

Then I shrugged and tossed the blackened bits of metal back on the rubbish. This wasn't accomplishing anything. Sure, he'd burned the suitcase; but what he done with the money? I went on back into the timber and began making long sweeps through it with my eyes on the ground.

Around ten o'clock I heard his motor again as he returned from fishing. Hardly knowing why, I came back toward the clearing. Perhaps it was curiosity. Here was the man who was the key to the whole thing, and I knew next to nothing about him; I'd seen him twice from a distance, and had spent one long and terrible minute staring at the seat of his overalls. I cautiously circled the open space until I could see the door in front of the cabin. Well screened by underbrush, I lay down to watch. Smoke issued from the stove-pipe, and in a short while he came out and sat down in the doorway with a cup of coffee. I still couldn't see his face clearly because he was almost as far away as he had been those two times he'd passed me in his boat, but I had an impression of a pudgy and ineffectual little man made ridiculous by that gun-belt strapped about his waist. He put down the coffee cup after a while and walked out into the yard, moving with what he apparently considered the deadly crouch of the Western gunman. His hand shot down to the holster and came up with the .38, the cold-eyed and implacable frontier marshal facing his man in the street at sundown and beating him to the draw. Take that, you varmint! He repeated this several times, practicing the blazing wizardry with the Colt that had made him the scourge of the bad ones. The poor barmy little bastard, I thought.

He went back in the cabin, and when he emerged again he was carrying a magazine. He sat down in the doorway with his feet on the step, and began to read. It was probably cooler there than inside. He held the magazine very close to his face, not more than twelve inches away at most,

and I noticed he had on a pair of the glasses I had seen while ransacking the place. Apparently his eyesight was considerably below the minimum standard for eagle-eyed lawmen; judging from where he was holding the magazine he wouldn't be able to read it at all without those cheaters.

*Oh?* I frowned reflectively; an idea was beginning to nudge me.

Wait. Don't go off half-cocked, I warned myself. Try to remember. He hadn't had them on either of the times I'd seen him in his boat, nor just now while practicing his draw. I was certain of the latter, and reasonably sure of the former. Then he could and did get around without them, when he wanted to. Probably they were solely for reading. *Could* he read without them? I went on studying him, watching the way he labored at it with his face right up against the page and remembering the thickness of those lenses. There wasn't a chance. I felt a tingle of excitement as all the parts of it began to fall into place. He'd take me right to it, and then never tell anybody else that he had.

When he finally tired of reading and went inside, I slipped backward and faded into the trees. Returning to the station wagon, I ate the sandwich and drank some coffee, and then sat smoking and thinking about it. The first thing I had to do was get back in the cabin. Today, if possible, for it would save a trip, and I was afire with impatience. Maybe my luck would hold and he'd go out fishing again in the afternoon. I returned to the point and waited. Hours went by. Finally, a little after five in the afternoon, I heard his motor start and he came out of the cove. He went on up toward the bend at the far end of the reach; maybe he'd found good fishing there this morning. I slipped through the timber, and when I reached the clearing I could still hear his motor fading away in the distance.

I entered the cabin, beginning to feel at home in the place now. The glasses he'd had on were atop the chest of drawers, where they had been before. I stepped quickly over to the trunk, lifted off the piles of magazines, and opened it. The others were still in the tray, inside their case. I slipped them out, and compared them. As far as I could tell, they were exactly alike; the ones in the trunk were merely a spare set in case he broke the others. They each had the same thick lenses that gave terrific magnification. Without them, he'd see ordinary print as a grayish and chaotic blur. So far, so good. I returned the spare set to their case, shoved them in my pocket, and closed the trunk. Leaving the other pair on the chest of drawers, I went

out. On the way back to the car, I threw the ones I'd taken into the lake, case and all. They sank out of sight. I drove on back to town.

When I got home Jessica was out somewhere. Probably at a movie, I thought. I didn't care; we were finished, and the hell with it. Once I got my hands on the late Mr. Haig's enticing legacy . . . No, I cautioned myself, not so fast. Not until some of the heat had cooled down and they'd written this area off as a fluke. I might have to stick around as long as six months, just to be sure.

I showered, shaved, and changed clothes, and then began searching through a trunk full of personal gear for what I'd need. I found an old passport photograph that would do, and a slim black wallet I'd had for use with evening clothes. What else? Oh, yes; a piece of clear plastic. I couldn't find any that would serve; that on my driver's license was too small. Well, there should be something around the shop.

I drove over. It was dark now. I let myself in, re-locked the door, and went into the office, switching on the light over the desk. I drew the blind over the single window. Now, what about the plastic? The answer occurred to me almost instantly; I went out into the showroom and got a fly box out of the showcase, one of the small ones without compartments in it. Taking out my knife, I cut the bottom out of it. After rounding the corners slightly, I had a flat and transparent sheet nearly three inches by four. I studied it. Maybe it was *too* clear. Taking it back to the shop, I rubbed one side of it with steel wool to scratch it up a little. It was just right.

Back in the office, I went to work on the wallet with the knife, cutting a window in the inner flap just slightly smaller than the plastic. Then I slipped the latter under it, and stuck it in place with cement. I put the whole thing under the desk dictionary to set up while I prepared the card.

What, exactly, had it looked like? I couldn't remember, and then realized that that in itself was the answer. It made no difference at all as long as it had a picture and a signature of sorts. I located an inventory card, rolled it into the typewriter, and pecked out a little form attesting that the following

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ was a paid-up member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and was permitted to solicit on the streets after examination by a competent physician. Then I typed in George U. Ward as the name of the individual in question, signed his name in the lower left corner, and scrawled something flourishing and indecipherable in the lower right. I

stuck the photograph to it with some more of the cement. Very impressive, I thought, studying it critically. I didn't have anything I could use for a seal, but it didn't matter. I trimmed it to the right size, tucked it in behind the plastic window in the wallet, and cemented it in place, wondering what the penalty was for impersonating a Federal officer, even with something like this. It didn't matter, however; who would ever know?

The warrant was easier. I took one of the finance company's standard mortgage forms from the desk, filled in Cliffords' name, and signed it William Butler Yeats in another burst of calligraphic frenzy. Gathering up the scraps of leather and plastic left over from the operation, I disposed of them in the garbage can at the rear of the building. I sealed the warrant and the do-it-yourself credentials in an envelope, shoved it in my pocket, and went back to the house. Jessica still hadn't returned. So much the better; I didn't want her watching and wondering.

When I went upstairs, got a suitcase out of the hall closet, and carried it into the bedroom, I found why she was still gone. A note was pinned to the pillow on what had been my side of the bed until I'd move to the den. Nice touch, I thought; Clausewitz couldn't have improved on it. If I never did see it, it wasn't her fault.

*"Just in case you might possibly be interested,"* it said, *"I have gone to Sanport for a week at the beach. Don't forget to put out the cat. Or cats."*

Well, that was fine. Except for Otis at the store, there was nobody who would be likely to notice or be curious about my movements now until the whole thing was finished. And I could take care of Otis all right. I put the open leather bag on the bed and turned to the closet. Selecting a conservative, tropical-weight suit, I folded it, hanger and all, into the bag.

Well, maybe she had friends down there. Some girl, maybe, who'd gone to school with her and later married a man named Kleinfelter who was in the cotton brokerage business. Sit on the beach and cut up old touches—that sort of thing. Who cared?

Let's see. White shirt, cuff-links, blue tie. There was room to put in the soft straw hat without crushing it.

Kleinfelter himself would be five-seven and bald, and never talk about anything but the tax structure. And, anyway, it was *Mrs.* Kleinfelter she'd gone to school with. Remember those silly pajama parties? Remember that

creepy Rowbottom boy, the one whose ears stuck straight out from the side of his head . . . “

For Christ’s sake, I thought; what do I care what she went to Sanport for, or who she knows down there? We’re washed up, we’re not even sleeping together any more, and what she does is her own business.

She wouldn’t, anyway. She didn’t go in for that sort of thing. So maybe she did have all the dulcet amiability of a maladjusted camel when she got her back up and started going elemental and bitchily female all over the place, she still wouldn’t . . .

No?

Well, look, stupid; it took you sixty days, and you’re no muscle-headed beach boy. You’re an operator.

But that was different. She’s sore now; she’s boiling. She’s furious. She could raid a Sea Scout encampment, out of sheer spite.

I took the suitcase out and put it in the back of the station wagon, covering it with a couple of old blankets and a kapok life-belt so it wouldn’t be seen.

It was lonely being all by myself in the house, and I was a long time getting to sleep. Just combat fatigue. I thought; I was up there too long.

\* \* \*

Early in the morning I dressed in dacron slacks and an Egyptian-cotton sports shirt and left the house bareheaded. I had some breakfast in town and drove over to the store.

When Otis came in, I said, “Think I’ll be out this afternoon. There are a couple of good prospects down in Exeter who could use a fresh sales wheeze, and I want to talk to the advertising manager of the radio station about those spot announcements he’s trying to sell us.”

“Fine,” he said. “Maybe you could work up a good singing commercial. Let’s see . . . How about *Outboard motors, for happy boaters?*”

“You’re a hell of an advertising man,” I said. “You forgot the sponsor’s name. Look. *Bring your signorina to Godwin’s marina—*”

“Tell me when to cry.”

“Shut up. —*She’ll give her all in a Godwin yawl—*”

“That’s a sailboat.”

“Well, that’s what we’re talking about, Abbott. Boat sales. Yuk, yuk, yuk. You had enough?”

“You win,” he said. “I’d rather work.”

He went back to the shop.

Business was slow, and it was a long morning. I was impatient and nervous now, wanting to get started. Around eleven the telephone rang while I was in the office. Otis was up front, so he answered it.

“For you, boss,” he called.

I went out. He gave me a quizzical glance as he handed me the instrument, but said nothing. He turned and walked away, rather pointedly, I thought.

It was Jewel Nunn. If she kept calling here I was going to have to stay nearer the phone.

“How are you?” I asked. “I was thinking of you.”

Why? I asked myself. What the devil was I supposed to be selling now?

“I just wanted to thank you for the bottle of perfume,” she said softly.

“Where are you?” I asked, knowing very well where she was.

“At Hampstead, at the drug store. I had to come in to do some errands. . . .”

I thought of a good out first, and then said, “Well, listen, can’t I drive down?”

“I don’t think you’d better. . . .”

“It would only take a minute.”

We-ell—I mean, do you think . . . No. No, you just can t.”

“But I want to see you. . . .” I broke off, and then said, “Wait, how long will you be there?”

“Just a little while. I have to go to Exeter.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed. “I have to see this prospect at twelve. Man I’ve been trying to get hold of for a month. But maybe. . . .”

“No. I mean, I just wanted to thank you.”

“It was nothing. You deserve much nicer things than that.”

“Good-bye,” she said. She hung up.

Otis went to lunch early, and while he was gone I put an empty two-gallon fuel can in the back of the station wagon, under the blankets, checking at the same time to be sure I had a wrench. When he returned I gathered up the briefcase containing the boat literature and started out.

“Hold it down,” I said. “I probably won’t be back till after closing time.”

I drove fast, going down to Hampstead and cutting across to State 41, and was in Exeter in less than an hour. I knew she was ahead of me, going to the same place, and hoped I didn’t run into her. I parked in the square and made my calls, getting them out of the way as rapidly as possible. One of the prospects, an attorney, was out of town, but I left some brochures with his secretary. The other was a minor bank official, and busy, so I cut the pitch to five minutes, and went to see the huckster.

We kicked the spot commercial around for about twenty minutes, and I told him I’d have to take it home and incubate a few days before I finalized. He was an earnest young type fresh out of school, and while he was translating me into English I left. Just as I was getting into the car I saw her going along the street with some bundles in her arm. She looked very nice and erect and young. She didn’t see me.

I drove on out of town. It was twenty minutes after two on a hot August afternoon. If everything went well, I was going to make over a hundred thousand dollars in the next four hours.

## Ten

I turned off 41 into the short access road, hoping anxiously there wouldn't be any fishermen down there today. The chances of it were slight, however, since it was Monday. When I came around the last turn in the twisting pair of ruts and saw the camp-ground and snatches of the sheet-metal glare of the water through the trees I breathed softly in relief. It was as deserted and silent as the upper reaches of the Orinoco.

I got out and surveyed a route through the timber and then backed the station wagon over it until I was a good hundred yards from the road. Taking the wrench and the two-gallon can, I crawled under the back and removed the drain-plug at the bottom of the gasoline tank. I filled the can and then let the rest run out and soak into the ground. When the tank was completely dry, I replaced the drain-plug and poured about a quart back into it from the can. If the car would start at all, the fuel pump should be able to pick up enough to run it for possibly a mile, and perhaps almost to the highway.

Capping the can tightly, I carried it a short distance away and hid it in some underbrush, noting the location carefully so I could find it again, in the dark if I had to. I got back in the seat and pressed the starter. The engine took hold promptly. I drove back to the road and parked just off it, facing toward the highway and far enough back from the camp-ground to be out of sight of anyone going past in a boat.

Lifting out the suitcase, I stripped down to my shorts and changed clothes. I carefully knotted the blue tie, using the rear-view mirror to check the result. I put on the hat, slid into the jacket of the suit, and ripped open the envelope containing my credentials and the warrant. After stowing these in the pockets of the jacket, I put my old slacks and sports shirt in the suitcase and stowed it away again, under the blankets. Removing the registration holder from the steering wheel shaft, I hid it nearby in some bushes. It probably wasn't necessary, but there was no use taking chances.

There was nothing in the car that would identify me. I checked to be sure I still had the spare ignition key I always carried in my wallet, locked the station wagon, and dropped the leather key case in my pocket. I was as ready as I was ever going to be. Lean, unrelenting, deadly, Special Agent G. U. Ward was on the job with the look of far distances in his eyes. No, the look of eagles, I thought. Far distances you had in Westerns. I wondered if this interlude of goofiness meant I was nervous. No. I was all right. There was nothing to it; the whole thing was ridiculously easy.

I cut out across the bottom, taking my time. There wasn't much chance he'd be out on the lake this early, and I had to get inside the cabin as the first move. When I reached a point in the edge of the timber where I could see the cove, I saw his boat was there. He was nowhere in sight. Probably taking a nap, I thought.

I waited, remaining well back from the clearing. Three-quarters of an hour went by. Shortly after four-fifteen he came out the door and went down to the boat. He had on his straw sombrero and gun-belt and holster, and was carrying a spinning rod. He cranked the motor and went straight across to the edge of the bed of pads on the other side of the waterway. I circled the edge of the clearing and came up directly behind the cabin. When I looked around the corner I could see him through an opening in the trees at the edge of the water, but he was almost two hundred yards away and intent on his casting. There was little chance he would see me. I slipped around the corner and entered.

The reading glasses were on top of the chest of drawers. As I picked them up I noticed they'd had a minor repair job since I'd seen them last. A narrow strip of white tape was stuck to the outer edge of the right lens, apparently to hold it in the frame. A disquieting thought struck me; maybe he had discovered the spare set was missing. Presumably he had jarred these somehow and loosened that lens; wouldn't that cause him to dig out the other pair?

I whirled and lifted the magazines off the trunk and opened it. There were no glasses in it. I closed it and hurriedly rifled the drawers in the chest, and then started making a quick but thorough search of the entire cabin. Half-way through this, I was struck with the absurdity of it. What difference did it make if he had discovered they were gone;

He couldn't possibly have replaced them in this length of time. And he was here, wasn't he? This was the reason I'd sabotaged the spares rather than the set he was using—to head off any possibility he might be in town replacing them when I came back. Everything was right according to plan. I replaced my divots and returned to the pair on the chest of drawers.

Picking them up, I held them against the palm of my left hand while I hit each of the lenses a smart rap with the back of my knife. They cracked all the way through, but did not shatter. I replaced them carefully, turning them a little so they would be in profile to anyone on the other side of the room or near the door.

Now to set the stage. I stepped to the door and looked out. He was only partly visible through the screen of foliage. I went back to the shed, squatted under the bench, and lifted down the cereal carton. The two packages of tens were still in it. Hurrying back to his garbage dump, I gathered up the bits of hardware from the burned suitcase. I took everything into the cabin. Clearing the kitchen table of its accumulation of syrup-smeared dirty dishes, I moved it slightly toward the center of the room and put a chair beside it.

I set the pieces of blackened hardware on the table, spread out a little as if I had been examining them, and lifted the money from the carton. One package of the tens I left in its paper binder, but the other, which had the stain along the edge, I opened, preserving the band intact, and scattered loosely on the surface. I stood back and surveyed it. It made quite an impressive picture. There was nothing to do now but wait. I located a dirty plate to use for an ash-tray, lit a cigarette and sat down. I hoped he didn't fish too long. Now that everything was ready, I wanted to get on with it; inactivity was going to make me nervous.

In about twenty minutes I heard the motor start. But he was only moving to a new location further along the weed bed. I cursed impatiently. Another fifteen minutes dragged by. The motor started again, and this time when I looked out I saw him headed in toward the cove. All right, I thought; here we go. Make it good, pal.

I stepped out the door and went around to the side of the cabin. I heard him cut the motor to glide into the cove, and then in a minute his footsteps as he came up the path toward the cabin. I let him draw nearer. There seemed only a remote chance he'd be silly enough to try to shoot me with

that gun, but I wanted to be near enough to stop him in the event of that being an unwarranted assumption on my part. He was very near the door now. I stepped around the corner right in front of him.

“Mr. Cliffords?” I asked. “Mr. Walter E. Cliffords?”

He stopped short, holding the spinning rod in one hand and a very large bass on a stringer in the other. The guileless blue eyes went round with amazement. He looked like a startled baby.

“What’s that?” he asked blankly.

“Are you Mr. Cliffords?” I repeated.

“Sure,” he said, recovering a little. He frowned at me as if I were a trifle dense. Who else would he be? “I’m the only one that lives here,” he explained. “What you want?”

I took one more step forward and brought the black identification folder out of the pocket of my jacket.

“My name’s Ward,” I said, flipping it open briefly before his face and then closing it again. “Federal Bureau of Investigation. You’re under arrest, Mr. Cliffords.”

“Arrest?” The baby eyes went even rounder.

His mouth fell open and he dropped the rod and the fish to the ground. I tensed up, but he was only shoving his hands into the air. He held them stiffly at arms’ length above his head.

This seemed a trifle on the dramatic side, but it was all right with me. Then, so suddenly he took me by surprise, he moved. He took a step backward, turned to face the wall of the cabin, and tilted himself forward and off balance until he was supported by his outstretched hands against the planks.

“What . . . ?” I said.

Then I got it. You always did that with dangerous criminals. It immobilized them while you lifted their arsenals. I unbuckled his gunbelt, caught it as it dropped, transferred the .38 to my pocket, and tossed the belt itself inside the door. They didn’t do it any better on *Dragnet*. He still made no move to straighten up, and I was about to order him to when I caught myself just in time.

It was his arrest, by God, and he wanted it to be carried out in the approved manner. I still hadn’t frisked him for a hidden gun. I stooped and

ran my hands up both sides of his legs, one at a time, and then up his body and under his arms.

“All right,” I said curtly.

He straightened and turned to face me. The round pixie face was filled with the wonder of a child beholding old faithful for the first time “A G-man,” he said in awe. “The F.B.I. What you know about that?”

I took the folded mortgage form from my breast pocket and held it out to him. “This is the Federal warrant for your arrest.”

He accepted it gingerly, as if it might explode.

Then he unfolded it and stared blankly. “I can’t read nothing without my specs,” he said. “They’re inside.”

I nodded toward the door. “All right. Let’s go in.”

I was right behind him. At the first step he took to the left, toward the chest, I snapped crisply, “Never mind! Stay away from those drawers. Stand right there in the center of the room.”

“Yessir,” he said.

“Where are they?” I asked. “I’ll get them.”

“On top of that dresser.”

“All right,” I said. “Don’t move from there.” I stepped over to the chest, turning my head to look back at him as I picked up the glasses. They slipped from my fingers. I made a desperate stab at them with the other hand to catch them before they could hit the floor, and batted them against the wall. The lenses shattered.

“Damn it!” I said. I turned and faced him apologetically, “I’m sorry as the devil, Mr. Cliffords. We’ll get you another pair.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” he said.

I waited for him to mention the other pair in the trunk. When we didn’t find them, of course, I’d jump right down his throat for stalling, and divert his attention from a fact that could look quite fishy if he had the intelligence to grasp it. However, he said nothing about them. I glanced at him. He had taken the bait. He’d turned his head and was staring at the evidence on the kitchen table.

He shook his head resignedly. “I should have knowed,” he said. “I should have knowed I’d never get away with it.”

I was in. It was as easy as that.

I stepped over and gently lifted the warrant from his nerveless fingers, returning it to my pocket. "You'd better sit down," I said, not unkindly.

He collapsed into the chair beside the table. When he took his eyes off the money and looked up at me, however, I was puzzled by the expression on his face. Instead of the blank despair I had expected, there was something odd in it. Dumb admiration was as near as I could come to it.

"How did you ever find it out?" he asked.

"Never mind," I said. "We'll get to that in a minute. Right now it's my duty to warn you that anything you say can be used against you. You've got yourself in a bad jam, Mr. Cliffords."

"Will there be reporters?" he asked. "You reckon they'll take my picture and print it in the papers?"

He reminded me of a child hoping to be taken on a picnic.

"I don't think you realize the mess you're in," I said, frowning.

"Oh?" he said. "What you reckon they'll charge me with?"

I fired up a cigarette, closed the lighter, and returned it to my pocket, letting him wait. I had to scare him now, and scare him badly.

"Not nothing real serious?" he suggested. "After all, all I done was find it. . . ."

I exhaled smoke and stared at him for a long minute. "I'm afraid you're not very familiar with the law, Mr. Cliffords. A man was killed in that hold-up, as you know. That, of course, is the equivalent of first-degree murder."

"But, look, Mr. Ward . . . I didn't have nothing to do with that."

"Unfortunately," I went on sternly, "that's not quite the case. The minute you took that money for yourself and failed to report it to us, you made yourself an accessory. Under the law, you're guilty right along with Haig. However, even if the Federal charge was reduced to obstructing justice or compounding a felony, there's still the matter of prior jurisdiction. . . ."

I wasn't sure as to the accuracy of all this legal gobbledegook, but it didn't matter. He would know even less about it. And it was working. He leaned forward, staring at me.

"The State may want to hold you on a charge of murder," I went on. "That would take precedence, of course."

"Murder?"

I nodded. "We can't be sure, of course, until we exhume the body, but the local District Attorney is interested. He feels there is a good chance

Haig was still alive when you found him, and that you killed him for the money. . . .”

Cliffords broke in. “But he wasn’t, Mr .Ward. He was dead, I tell you. He’d been dead for days. That’s how come I happened to find him; it was all them birds.”

I had a hunch he was telling the truth, but the thing now was to keep him guessing and scared.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “When the body is exhumed, they may be able to tell. Just what you’ll be tried for is none of my business, anyway. I’m here merely to bring you in. And, of course, to recover the money.”

“Oh, I’ll show you where it is,” he said eagerly. “Will that help? I mean . . .”

“I can make no deals,” I said, being stern about it. “Of course, obviously it won’t hurt your case any, especially if you haven’t spent too much of it.”

“Oh, I hardly spent any at all.” Then his face fell. “But I *did* burn all them bonds and things, when I burned the satchel.”

He’d merely saved me the trouble of doing it myself, but I shook my head gravely. “That’s not so good,” I said. “Don’t you see that establishes willful intent?”

A couple more hours of this, I thought, and I should be able to pass the bar exam.

He sighed. “I’m sure sorry, Mr. Ward.”

I shook my head sympathetically. “I am, too, in a way, in spite of all the trouble you caused us. I mean, you weren’t a criminal—at least, up until now. And at your age—well, even ten years. . . .”

“Ten years?” he repeated slowly. I had him going now.

“Forget I said that,” I told him quickly. “I shouldn’t have. I mean, I’m not a judge. I’m an arresting officer. But tell me, what in the name of Heaven did you do it for? You didn’t spend much of it, you say. What did you want with it?”

He looked down at his hands. “Well, sir, it’s kind of a silly thing, I reckon. It got hold of me when I seen how much there was and when I got to thinking about it afterward. If I pretended like it was mine long enough, and nobody come along to take it away from me, I could mebbe take and do this thing I been thinking about all my life. One of them sort of things you know you ain’t ever going to do, but you just keep thinking about anyway.”

“What’s that?” I asked. We were wasting time, but it interested me.

“I wanted to buy a coconut farm,” he said simply.

“Coconut. . .?” I stared at him, and then I saw the dream. It was all over the round, lost, wistful face—the face of the world’s eternal patsy. He was like a child thinking about Christmas morning.

“On one of them islands,” he went on softly, not even looking at me. “Down south, you know. Just a one-island farm, but I would own the whole island and every single, blessed thing on it. I’d live on it, in a big house on top of a hill, and there’d be all these niggers. I’d wear boots, and one of them explorer’s hats, and I’d be good to ‘em. You know, things like doctoring them when they was sick, and holding trials when one of ‘em stole something from another one.

“There wouldn’t be any other white people except this store-keeper that I didn’t like and that I’d make him jump like Billy-be-damned when I said something to him, and then of course the straw-boss and his wife. The straw-boss, you understand, is the one that handles the niggers and that I give the orders to, and his wife would look just like Laura LaPlante. . . .”

He broke off, his face a picture of dreamy rapture. “You remember Laura LaPlante?

He had sixteen years on me. I shook my head. “No. But I know who you mean. nothing changes but the name.”

“Anyway,” he went on, not even hearing me, “this straw-boss’s wife would look exactly like her, and when he was off at the other end of the island seeing to the coconut trees and telling the niggers what to do she’d come in and sleep with me because she thought about me all the time, day and night. He’d know about it, of course, but there wasn’t anything he could do because I paid him so much he didn’t want to lose the job. . . .”

He sighed and shook his head. I wondered if it had ever occurred to him he could have shortened the dream considerably and got into the sack with her a lot faster by marrying the LaPlante type himself and by-passing the overseer. But maybe that wouldn’t work.

“Well, cheer up,” I said. “You might have got tired of her, and think of what a hell of a place that would have been to try to dodge a woman. Now, let’s go get it.”

“Sure,” he replied. “But first, would you tell me how you fellers found out I had it.”

"It wasn't easy," I said. "It took us a year and a half. And there's a chance we never would have if you hadn't spent some of the money we recognized. . .

"Them twenty-dollar bills," he said. "I knowed it. I knowed it."

You just knowed it too late, Bwana Sahib. "Why did you spend them, then?"

"I didn't stop to think till I'd already passed three of 'em. Then I noticed the numbers all run in order. So you traced em?"

I shook my head. "No. We never did find out who spent them originally, but we did know they came from this area. So we went back to the other angle we were working on. Haig got away from that wreck, all right, and away from Sanport—we knew that. Nobody in Sanport would have hidden him; he was too hot. So the chances were that before the police arrived, he forced his way into a car that was passing and put a gun on the driver. That happens quite often. But the thing we never could understand was why the driver didn't report it afterward. Even if Haig had killed him and stolen the car, the whole thing would have come out eventually. The car would have been found, or some friend or relative of the driver would have reported him missing. That was the thing that threw us, you see. Simply that the driver would have reported it if he were alive, or somebody would have reported the driver's absence if he'd just disappeared."

"It took us a long time to see the answer, but we finally did, just about the time your twenty dollar-bill showed up. Suppose the driver died before he could tell us, all right, but in a perfectly routine manner that wasn't suspicious at all? Routine, at least, in police work."

"We checked the Highway Patrol reports for that day, and we found it. Six hours and twenty minutes after Haig disappeared out his getaway car when it hit that truck, an elderly couple in a 1950 Plymouth sedan went off the road two miles from here just after dark in a downpour of rain and were instantly killed. They were on the wrong road, and they were driving faster than they normally did, even in good visibility on dry pavement. Haig, you see? He was in the car. He'd forced them to hide out somewhere until after dark."

"He was probably hurt, and maybe punchy with shock, so he didn't know where he was going. The only thing he was sure of was that he had to stay off the highway. He could have left a trail of blood, but it washed right

away. It was raining, you see. And when they picked up the old people, there was nothing in the car to indicate he'd ever been with them.

"It was easy from there. We just came out here, among other places, and searched your camp. We found what was left of his suitcase, and the rest of those twenties, plus those tens."

When I finished, Cliffords didn't say anything for a moment. He merely sighed and looked at me with that awe in his face. Then, finally, he said, "And I thought I could get away with it."

"All right," I said. I was tired of wasting time. "You ready to show me where it is?"

He stood up. "Sure," he said. "There's three more thousand of it under the house, on a sill. Unless you found that, too."

That was wonderful, I thought swiftly. Add that to nearly a thousand there on the table. It was going to work out beautifully.

"And the rest of it?" I asked.

"Buried in three syrup buckets, under a down tree. About a mile up the lake."

"How much?" I asked. "Do you know?"

He nodded. "I added up the little bands. It took me a long time. There's a hundred and thirteen thousand of it."

And it was so ridiculously easy. All I'd had to do was ask for it.

"Umh-umh," I said thoughtfully. "That checks out pretty well with the bank's figures. Well, let's get on with it."

## Eleven

We picked up that under the house. It had been almost directly over my head when I'd peered under that other time, but I'd been looking for something much larger. It was all in tens, five hundred dollars to the bundle, wrapped in waxed paper and lying flat on top of the sill. We brought it inside and he watched while I gathered up and counted what was on the kitchen table.

“Altogether, three thousand eight hundred and forty,” I announced.

He found a paper bag for it. I put it all inside, folded it over carefully, and sealed it with some cellophane tape he had. I wrote the sum on it, and then the notation, “Recovered in vicinity of cabin.” He watched intently, very much impressed with all this police routine.

“We’ll have to come back by here so you can pack the clothes you want to take to jail with you,” I said. “So there’s no use carrying this around. We’ll pick it up on the way back. Let’s see. . . .”

I pulled a stack of magazines and comic books away from the wall and shoved the money behind it.

“Should be safe there,” I said.

He nodded. “Sure. Nobody ever comes here.”

“You say it’s about a mile?” I asked.

“Pretty near, I reckon.”

“I don’t see any sense wearing this hot jacket up there.” I said. I slipped it off. Removing his .38 from the pocket, I shoved it in the waistband of my trousers. Then I removed the fake warrant from the inside breast pocket, and when I slid it into the right hip pocket of my trousers I eased out the leather key case that was already there, holding it concealed in my hand for an instant while I was folding the jacket. I let it drop just as I tossed the jacket across the bed and turned toward the door.

He called my attention to it. “Say, Mr. Ward, your keys fell out.”

"Oh." I picked them up. "Thanks. Wouldn't do to lose them. We'd be stranded."

"Your car's down at the camp-ground, I reckon?"

"That's right," I said. I picked up the jacket again, dropped the keys in one of the pockets, and tossed it back on the bed. We went out. He picked up a short-handled shovel.

It was late afternoon now, and shadows were long across the clearing. We started out through the timber with Cliffords leading the way, going generally north but angling gradually way from the lake.

"Is Haig up this way, too?" I asked.

"No, sir." He pointed off to the right. "Up there. Not too far from that road, and about a mile this side of the highway."

"Well, we won't bother with him today," I said. "We'll bring you out tomorrow or the next day and you can show us where. The local District Attorney wants to be represented, anyway, and there's the coroner."

"What could they tell now?" he asked, plodding purposefully ahead and not looking around. "I mean, it's been a year and a half."

"Probably not much," I replied. "Of course, if you had shot him and the bullet struck a bone. . . . That would show up, naturally."

"But I *didn't* shoot him, Mr. Ward! I'm telling you the truth about the whole thing. I was out huntin' squirrels and I seen all them birds circlin' around. . . ."

"We'd assume it was that way," I said. "Had they bothered him?"

"No. They was just beginning to light in the trees— "Then you could form a pretty good idea as to what did kill him?"

"Sure. He'd been in a bad wreck, and he'd bled to death. Anybody could see that. I wondered how he'd ever made it that far from the highway. He was pretty well banged up all over, but the worst was the cut on his right arm."

"And the suitcase was near him?"

"His head and shoulders was lying on it, and he still had his hand through the handle. Like he was trying to get up with it."

I had a momentary flash of what it was probably like, bleeding to death at night in the rain, and wondered as to the nature of Haig's particular coconut farm, but gave it up. There was never much profit in that type of speculation, and the ivory tower boys could handle it without help.

“Well, it’s too bad,” I said. “And it’s hard to understand why you did it. As far as we’ve been able to determine, you’ve never been in trouble before.”

“No, sir. I worked all my life. Section hand for the S.P.”

“You’ve never been in prison at all, have you?”

“No, sir.”

Plodding on ahead of me through the timber in that big hat, he reminded me of some rotund and ineffably earnest gnome who’d just been handed an important assignment by the Fairy Princess.

“Don’t let it get you down,” I said. “You’ll make out all right.”

“Is it very bad?” he asked.

“We-ell,” I said thoughtfully, keeping one pace behind him, “naturally, it’s not any fun. It’s not supposed to be. But plenty of people come through it in fine shape.”

He said nothing.

“There’s been too much written and said about it by people who don’t know what they’re talking about,” I went on. “They distort the picture. They over-emphasize things that really aren’t too bad, and play down others that are worse. It’s not so much the bad food and the monotony and the overcrowding they talk about all the time, as it is other things they minimize and try to hush up. The homosexuals, for instance. They make it bad for everybody.”

“They . . . they do?”

“Yes. In this way. You have to watch out for them continually. They’re after you all the time, and the only effective way to discourage them is to fight. But fighting is against the rules, so you lose your privileges. The warden’s staff is too badly overworked and short-handed to hold a two-day hearing to determine who was at fault in a brawl. They merely penalize both parties and let it go. And if you get a reputation for being a trouble-maker you get the guards down on you, too. But don’t let it throw you. You’ll come through it all right.”

He made no reply. We changed direction a little to circle the end of a slough that still had water in it.

“How do you find your way around down here?” I asked. “I’d be lost in five minutes.”

"Oh, there ain't nothin' to it," he replied. "You just remember which way you're goin' all the time."

"It sounds easy," I said. "But I'd probably be two days trying to find my way back to the cabin."

"We're nearly there," he said. "You see the roots of that down tree, up ahead?"

I saw it. It was less than a hundred yards ahead in a heavy stand of oaks. One of them had fallen, apparently several years ago, carrying down a smaller one with it and creating a tangle of broken limbs and brush at the top. We hurried up. It would be sunset in about an hour, I thought, appraising the flat angle of the shafts of sunlight slanting down through the foliage overhead.

"It's under this big one," Cliffords said. He walked up alongside the bole of it to the first limb. I watched him, trying not to show my excitement. The trunk was about six inches off the ground here, supported by the welter of broken limbs beyond, and the ground was covered with a heavy carpet of old leaves.

He raked the leaves back, under the overhang of the round trunk, and I could see the depression where the earth had settled. He dropped to his knees and began scraping the dirt away with the edge of the shovel. I heard it strike metal. I leaned over his shoulder, staring down intently.

"I dug it up about five months ago and put it in new buckets," he said. "They rust out pretty fast."

He threw the shovel aside and started scooping the earth out with his hands. I could see them now, all three of them. They were buried in a row, vertically, with the bottoms up. He tugged at the first one, rocking it back and forth to free it from the ground. I dropped to my knees and did the same with the one on the other end. His came free, and then mine. He lifted out the middle one, which was free now that the others were removed. They lay side by side on the old leaves in a shaft of sunlight. They had brownish splotches of rust on them and were encrusted with the damp black sod in which they had lain, but to me they were more beautiful than three Grecian urns. I lit a cigarette, suddenly conscious that my shirt was stuck to me with perspiration, and knelt there just staring at them and savoring the tremendous exultation of the moment.

They were the standard one-gallon pails used in that part of the country for storing syrup, the same as the ones I'd seen in his cabin. Each had a wire handle and a tight, press-fit lid of the same diameter as the pail. I saw that after he had pressed on the lids he had dipped the tops in melted paraffin. Not bad, I thought; if he'd known about silica-gel dehydrators he could have eliminated rust altogether on the inside.

"You want to open 'em?" he asked.

I nodded. "Just one."

I set one of them upright between us. He took out his knife, scraped away some of the paraffin, and used the back of the blade to pry up the lid. It came free at last and fell to the ground. I looked inside, and for an instant I was almost afraid he'd hear the pounding of my heart. There was only one way to describe it, I thought; it was a gallon of money.

It was full. It was jammed with packages of fives, tens, twenties, and fifties. They were laid in flat, they were bent to fit the curve of the pail, they were doubled, they were put in every way imaginable to take advantage of every bit of space. Tens were jammed against fifties, and when I lifted a package of fives, there was a sheaf of hundreds under it. I tossed it back in. I didn't want him to see the trembling of my hands.

"She sure is a pile of money, ain't she?" he said.

It was time to get rid of him. I ground out the cigarette and nodded. "All right. You can put the lid back on. We'd better get going."

The steep-sided hole they had come from was just behind me and slightly to the right. He was bent over the pail, pressing down the lid. I shot a quick glance behind me and stood up. I stepped backward and when I felt the edge of the hole under my foot I let it slide on in.

"Damn ... !" I cursed explosively, waved my arms, and fell. My shoulder hit the log and I rolled off it to the ground.

He sprang over and knelt beside me. "Hey, Mr. Ward. Are you okay?"

I pushed myself to my hands and knees. "I'm all right," I said. "I just forgot about that damned hole."

"Here. Let me help you up." He took hold of my arm.

I tried to stand. The moment I put my right foot on the ground I sucked my breath in sharply and collapsed. Drawing a sleeve across my face to wipe off the sweat and dirt, I said shakily, "It's my ankle. Wait a minute."

He watched as I unlaced my shoe. I grimaced realistically as I pulled it off and felt the ankle and foot. "It's hot," I said. "But I don't think it's broken. Probably just a bad sprain."

"You think you can walk on it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Wait till I get my breath and I'll try again."

I did, and gave an even better performance. "No use," I said.

"Mebbe I could cut you something for a crutch."

"Not with that knife? it'd have to be something pretty heavy. It'll have to be bandaged, too." I moved the foot slightly and said, "Whew!"

"Well..." he said hesitantly, "I've got a roll of bandage stuff at the cabin. And some tape."

I considered it, looking doubtful "I don't know. . . ."

"Mebbe we could tear up our shirts and make a bandage."

"It'll take a longer strip," I told him. "Regular roll bandage, or a torn-up sheet. And I'll still have to have a crutch."

"I don't see no other way," he said. "I'll just have to go to the cabin. I got an axe there, and I could cut a sapling with a fork, and pad it at the top. I'll bring a sheet, and some liniment."

I frowned. "You're under arrest, on a serious charge. I'm not supposed to let you out of my sight."

"I can't think of nothing else," he said.

"You wouldn't try to escape?"

"No, sir."

"Well, all right," I said doubtfully. "I guess you couldn't get far, anyway, with no car."

That was pretty crude, but in dealing with a low grade mentality subtlety could be dangerous. He might miss it.

"Well, you'd better hurry along," I went on, before he could say anything. "It'll be dark in another hour or two."

"Sure," he said. He went off through the timber in the direction we had come, walking quite fast now.

As soon as he was out of sight I grinned and got up. I sat on the log and lit a cigarette. The thing to do was give him plenty of time; it didn't matter when I got out of here. He'd have to take to his feet after the car quit on him somewhere this side of the highway, and it would be most embarrassing for both of us if I refueled it and got out on the road before he'd managed to

thumb a ride. He might even take time to pack a lot of his gear, in fact, since he'd know I couldn't crawl back to the camp-ground before sometime tomorrow even if I knew the way. And even then I wouldn't get out of the bottom until they sent a search party after me.

I smoked the cigarette all the way out to the end before I made any move to open the other two pails, extracting in full measure the joys of anticipation. There were too few moments like this in life, and when you'd used them up they were gone forever. I thought of what was inside the pails, and then appraised the craftsmanship of the operation itself. Not bad, I thought. Of course, I'd had a lot of luck at the beginning, but the solution of the problem itself, after it was posed, was a creditable bit of work. It was a minor masterpiece, if I did say so.

Come on, hammy, I thought; quit milking the curtain calls and get to work. Grinding out the cigarette, I knelt and took out my knife. In a moment I had all three of them open. It was like dreaming you owned Fort Knox and then waking up to find the deed and the keys in your hand. The other two were exactly like the first, crammed full of currency in every denomination from five to a hundred. I hurriedly slipped off my shirt, spread it on the ground, and began piling the money on it, not trying to count it but searching for that I was going to have to destroy. When I came to a package that had that crisp, new look about it I'd toss it to one side. In a few minutes I had it all sorted out. Of course, I'd have to go over it more carefully later on, but I should have most of it. There were four more sheafs of those new twenties, six tens, and two in the fifty-dollar denomination.

Just to be sure, I picked up each one individually and riffled through it to make certain the serial numbers ran consecutively. They all did. I performed a quick calculation, using the sums printed on the bands. The twelve packages added up to twelve thousand dollars, which was an odd coincidence, I reflected, since they varied individually between \$500 and \$2,500 depending on denomination. I looked at the little stack of it. *Twelve thousand dollars!* All right, hero, I thought, you said you could; let's see you do it. Don't stall around long enough to begin to wonder if maybe it wouldn't be safe ten years from now. It'll never be safe as long as you live, and the world's not big enough to find a place you could spend it. There are people who buy it, sure. But then somebody knows. The way it is now, nobody does, or ever will. Keep it that way. Do it right.

Tossing all twelve of them over beside the hole, I began breaking the bands and crumpling bills into the bottom of it. When I had a neat pile of them I stuck the flame of the lighter against the corner of a fifty and shoved it in. They began to burn, flaming up nicely. I went on breaking open the bands and dropping money on the blaze, not enough at a time to smother it or cause it to flare too high. I remembered the other time, at the edge of the lake, and reflected that if you did enough of this to become an addict it could be a damned expensive habit. When it all was reduced to ashes I picked up a stick and crushed them to dust. I shoved in a little earth and stirred it about, mixing it. Then, taking the shovel, I caved the hole in all around, smoothing it out, and wound up by spreading the old dead leaves back over the whole thing. Boys, I thought, your trail is cold forever.

I was about to turn back to the other when I stopped, listening intently. It had sounded like an outboard motor starting, a long way off. I grinned. He could get down to the camp-ground faster that way, all right, and carry his luggage with less trouble. I held my breath and listened again, but I couldn't be sure whether I still heard it or not. A mile was too far, and he was going the other way. *Bon voyage*, Walter. I deem it a great honor to have touched your gentle spirit, however briefly, and may the pastures be forever green.

Well, they were green enough, I thought. He had that \$3,800 I'd given him, and while this didn't run to such items of baronial splendor as coconut farms, it would last him the rest of his life. That overseer would probably have shot him, anyway.

I knelt beside the money on the shirt and began putting it back into the pails. In a moment I was struck by the bizarre fact that while it was a streak of rust on a twenty-dollar bill that had started me theorizing in the first place and had eventually led to the correct solution in this thing, the present pails were shiny and clean inside. He had changed them a few months ago. Some of the money was badly streaked with the old stains, but getting them off would present no great problem. A few minutes' research in any library would produce the answer. Then I grinned. I could even write *Good Housekeeping*.

I finished the job, took one last, gloating look, and pounded the lids back on. After donning my shirt, I sat down to light another cigarette before starting back. Give him a little more time, to be sure he didn't come back to

the cabin after one of his comic books. He should be just about down to the campground now and getting into the car.

I noticed that in all the excitement over the money I had forgotten to put my shoe back on. I reached for it and slid it on my foot, but did not lace it. It was too luxurious just sitting there on the leaves with my back against the log while I smoked and thought of the \$101,000 there in front of me.

When I had finished the cigarette and ground it out, I looked at my watch. It was nearly six. Time to roll. I leaned forward to lace the shoe, and then froze up. What I'd heard was behind me, and quite near, and there was no doubt as to what it was. It was something or somebody walking through dry leaves.

I whirled, still sitting, and stared with growing horror. It was Cliffords. He was puffing his way toward me like some pudgy and self-consciously important gnome, and in his hands he was carrying a brown paper bag and a home-made crutch.

I knew I had to quit staring some way, but nothing seemed to work. The whole thing was crashing down around me, and my mind didn't seem capable of grasping anything except the fact that now we were *both* headed for prison.

He hurried up. "Well, this'll fix you up, Mr. Ward. I made you a real good crutch." He showed it to me.

He wanted me to tell him how good it was.

"You. . . ." I shook my head and tried again. This time I finally got tracked. "You were gone so long. I thought you'd decided to run for it."

He shook his head. "No, *sir*. Not me, Mr. Ward. Ain't no use tryin' to outfox the F.B.I. I found that out."

## Twelve

I tried to keep my face expressionless. What was the matter with the suet-headed little moron? I'd drawn him a picture; I'd sat down patiently and spelled it out for him, syllable by syllable. I'd told him how horrible it was in prison, and that he'd get ten years for what he'd done. I'd given him \$3,800. I'd furnished him a car. I'd broken my goddamned ankle for him and promised him it would be at least twelve to twenty-four hours before anybody even found out he'd escaped. I wanted to scream at him. What the hell did he want—Brownell to come down here and carry him out piggy-back and furnish him with a Duncan Hines list of approved hiding places;

"Ain't nobody escapes from the G-men," he went on, hunkering down in front of me. "I should of knowed better in the first place. Look at how you got Dillinger, and Machine-gun Kelly, and Karpis. . . ."

He was an F.B.I, buff. And I'd opened my fat mouth and made it worse.

". . . and when you explained how you fellers'd caught up with me . . . ." He stopped and gave a sententious shake of the head.

You're good, Godwin. You were magnificent. Tell him some more about how bright you are.

". . . and if you can't travel at all, Mr. Ward, I got it all figured out. I'll go down the lake and call your office and have 'em send out help. . . ."

If only he'd *shut up*. I was contemplating the ultimate madness of it. I'd arrested him, and now there was no way on earth I could escape from him. I was his hero—along with the F.B.I, in general. By God, *he* wasn't going to desert me. He'd help me get back to the office if it took the rest of the week. Maybe they'd put his picture in the papers. If I took him down to Sanport and kicked him out of the car he'd be in F.B.I, headquarters inside of twenty minutes telling them all about it. If I left him here and ran, he'd do the same thing. They'd get a description from him, and it might take Ramsey as long as five minutes to recognize me.

No, that wasn't quite the ultimate. The final, most putrid joke of all was the fact they probably wouldn't even prosecute the fatuous little meat-head. Why should they? They'd have me. Presumably I was intelligent enough to know right from wrong, and they could reach into the State and Federal grab-bags without even looking and come up with a half-dozen charges that would stick. I tried a few on for size—conspiracy, obstructing justice, destroying evidence, impersonating a Federal officer, compounding a felony, and probably grand theft and accessory to armed robbery. Add flight to escape prosecution. And, oh yes, I had just finished destroying twelve thousand dollars worth of United States currency they were trying to recover. They were going to like me better than anybody they'd had in their hair since Gaston B. Means.

"You got your shoe back on," he said.

"Yes," I replied wearily. "It began to feel a little better."

"Don't seem to be swole much. You reckon you'll need the bandage?"

"I don't think so." I laced the shoe up rather loosely. He handed me the crutch and I struggled to my feet, not bothering to make much of a production of it. What difference did it make now? Anyway, I was an F.B.I, superman, wasn't I? If I tucked my feet up my pants legs and roared off the ground like a pheasant he wouldn't consider it more than mildly noteworthy.

I'll carry the surp buckets," he said. He strung their handles on the wooden shaft of the shovel and slung it across his shoulder. I stared at them.

I'll go slow," he said. "Just tell me when you want to stop and rest."

He started out. I fell in behind him.

In a moment lie looked back over his shoulder. "Is the crutch about right?"

"It's fine," I said. He went on.

The three pails bumped gently together as they swayed to his stride, forever three feet before my eyes. I tried to look away from them. I tried not to hear the small metallic sounds they made.

"We'll make her in fine shape," he told me reassuringly over his shoulder. "Sure," I said.

"When we get to the cabin, we'll use the boat."

I didn't say anything. I merely reflected it would be wonderful if we drowned. It would be such a fitting close to our brief encounter and to this

perfect idyll of a day. Nothing short of committing suicide could lend it that final little brush-stroke it needed to make it complete. A truly formidable day. I thought, trying to keep my mind and attention off those pails; the great whore of all days. *Tenderly, day that I have loved, I close your eyes, and smooth your quiet brow, and fold your thin dead hands.*

The pails clinked companionably.

They contained one-hundred-and-one thousand dollars, and there were only two people on earth who knew it.

I wrenched my eyes away from the pails, feeling sick and very cold in my stomach. Still pools of shadow clotted and thickened under the trees as the sun went down.

Nobody knew I was out here, or that I had even been here.

That was irrelevant. That wasn't the question at all.

The proposition as stated is that everything you buy in this antic bazaar has its individual price tag. Look at it first; don't be a fool and cry about the bill afterward. You know what it is now; and understand that it won't be any different after it's too late to return the merchandise.

He backed me into this corner. . . .

No, he didn't. You backed yourself into it. Don't wait and make that great discovery after it's too late. Accept it now. You can buy your way out in something less than a minute, but it's not going to be on a pass.

The pails swung gently behind his shoulder, three feet away. I was becoming hypnotized. I kept seeing them as they had looked when they were open on the ground. I could put out my hand and touch them. Godwin's Law of Character Erosion states that the attrition of honesty. . . . Never mind that bright and sophomoric bit of wisdom. This is something else. Well, isn't murder the ultimate dishonesty?

The thing that was so terrible about it was its simplicity. I could go on and go to prison, for nothing. Or I could merely walk out of here with a fortune, and not go to prison at all.

It was twilight. I saw the edge of the clearing and the darkening bulk of the cabin ahead of us.

All right, I thought. But when you start, do it fast and very coldly, and don't think at all.

\* \* \*

Now we were inside the cabin, from which the light was almost gone. I felt very tight, and far away, and was concentrating on details like remembering to limp as I walked. I had picked up my jacket and the paper bag that contained the \$3,800. He had already put the three pails in the boat and had come back after the clothes he was going to take. He placed them in a cheap little imitation leather bag he took from under the bed.

"I reckon I can phone Mrs. Nunn to pick up the rest of my stuff," he said. "Mebbe sell it for me."

"Yes," I said.

I picked up the gun-belt from the floor. The loops were filled with cartridges and it was heavy. I held it out to him.

"I reckon I better leave that here," he said.

"You can take it," I told him. I'll turn in the gun, and maybe you can sell it to one of the deputies."

He had to have it on, but I wished we could stop talking. My voice sounded squeezed and breathless, as if it were coming off the top of my throat.

He buckled on the belt. He looked once around the cabin and went on through the door without saying anything. I was glad; that was past now. The encircling wall of trees was dark. Far overhead in the fading sky a few splashes of orange and pink were left over from the silent explosion of sunset. He looked up at them and then around at the clearing's thickening dusk.

"I . . ." he said.

Don't look at him. Don't listen.

"I liked it here," he said simply. "It was a nice place."

I clamped my jaws shut against the cold and terrible up-welling of pressure inside me and turned away. I gestured with my hand. We went down the trail toward the boat.

An old log running out into the water served as a pier. We got in. He handed me the valise, which I put forward with the pails. I shoved the folded paper bag into one of the pockets of my jacket, and dropped the jacket across the valise. He turned the boat outward and gave it a shove with an oar against the log. I sat on the midships seat, facing him. We coasted out of the cove on water that was as flat and black as oil. It was

intensely still, and on both sides of the waterway night grew and deepened among the trees, pushing outward to overrun this last outpost of day. I turned a little, looking forward, and slipped the wallet from the pocket of my trousers. I put it in the jacket. He cranked the motor. It began kicking us outward, away from the shore, as he headed for the bend. I removed my hat.

Almost at the same time I cried out, "Wait!" His face was a blur under the big shadow of his hat as he looked at me inquiringly. I reached past his arm and cut the motor. Instantly, the vast silence of the forest rolled back over us, unbroken except for the faint swish of water past the hull and the roaring in my ears. I was cold now, and he was locked out and far away.

I stood up. "I thought . . ." The boat rocked under my weight. I swayed, and lunged astern and outward, grabbing frantically for him as I fell. We went over the side together. The water closed over us. He kicked against me. I lost him. I went upward, and my head broke the surface.

Water swirled behind me, and I heard him gasp. "You . . . You all right, Mr. Ward?"

I turned and found him, and pressed him down into the water. He struggled wildly for a few seconds, and then he jerked with one final convulsion and became still under my hands, settling away from them toward the bottom. I snatched the gun from my trousers and let it drop. A last bubble of air, released from somewhere in his clothing, came upward, brushing against my throat.

It was a problem, an assignment you were handed and told to work out on the spot and under pressure; my mind was ice cold and very clear, shored off from everything as I concentrated on it. The boat was a deeper clot of shadow some ten feet away. I swam over to it, moving clumsily in my clothes and shoes. Catching the gunwale with one hand, I oriented myself with the dark shore-line, and began kicking back the way we had come. In a few minutes, just outside the cove, I could reach bottom with my feet. I waded in, pulling the boat.

Landing it beside the log, I stood alongside it while water ran out of my hair and clothing. Stripping the cuff-links from my shirt, I dropped them in the pocket of my jacket, which was still across his valise. I slipped off the tie and shirt, wrung them out, rolled them together, and tossed them on to the bank. Then I stepped out of the trousers, squeezed as much of the water from them as I could, and stepped out on the ground myself. I put the

trousers down with the shirt and tie. I emptied the water out of my shoes, wrung out the socks and put them with the other clothing, and put the shoes back on. Then, going back and forth on the log, I removed the valise, my jacket and hat, and the three pails from the boat, placing them near the pale blur of the shirt which I could see fairly well in the darkness. I went up to the cabin. Just outside the door and a little to one side, where he had dropped them, I felt around for the spinning rod and the big bass on its stringer. I couldn't find either of them. I oriented myself, and tried some more. That was odd. He'd dropped them both right here. Then I understood. When he came back for the bandage and the crutch, he'd moved them. But where? I *had* to have that rod.

Well, obviously, he would have taken it inside the cabin. I straightened and was about to go in when I stopped. How in the name of God was I going to find anything in there without a light? My cigarette lighter was down there in my trousers, soaking wet. It would be hours before it would work. Well, he had matches in there somewhere; I just had to find them. I stepped inside and groped my way toward the rear, bumping into a chair. The noise it made as it fell to the floor was startling and all out of proportion in the stillness. I went on until I felt the stove, and then stopped, trying to visualize the exact layout. Nearly all the back wall was covered with shelves, as I remembered, but the matches should be on the end near the stove. I moved, holding my hands before me. I touched the edge of a shelf and began sliding my hands along it. Something fell to the floor and broke. I cursed. I knocked something else over, but it remained on the shelf. I was beginning to be nervous and apprehensive now. It might take an hour to find his box of matches. Then I grunted. I had felt them. It was a large cardboard box, slid partly open. They were the big kitchen ones.

I struck one, and the instant it flared he came flying back at me from a dozen directions at once, from the dirty, syrup-smeared dishes and the unmade bed and from the piles of cheap and pathetic magazines. The poor, lost, futile. . . .

*Stop it!*

I coldly sealed him out and swung around, searching for the lamp. It was on the big packing box that had the oilcloth on it. I lit it, replaced the chimney, and looked around in the dim yellow light. There was the rod. It was in the corner by the chest of drawers, where the rifle and shotgun stood.

The stringer was on the floor beside it. The bass was gone. Well, naturally, he would have thrown it back in the lake so it wouldn't smell up the place.

I was about to go across to pick up the rod when I became conscious of something sticky under my shoe. I looked down. The thing I had knocked off the shelf and broken was a syrup pitcher, and I was tracking syrup all over the cabin. I swore, whispering harshly in the darkness. Damn the rotten luck. Well, I'd clean it up later; I had to come back, anyway. There were some torn-up comic books in the wood-box beside the stove. I ripped some pages off one, cleaned the syrup from my shoe, and stuffed the paper in the stove. Setting two matches on the floor just to one side of the door where I could find them next time, I picked up the rod, blew out the lamp, and went out.

It was two or three minutes before my eyes became accustomed to the darkness again. I went down to the boat and put the rod in. It still had a small spinner attached to the line. I felt around under the forward seat until I located his tackle box. It was a metal one, with a tray that hinged upward when the lid was raised. Opening it, I set it on the bottom grating between the midships and after seats. Placing my shoe near one end of the tray, I stepped down, putting part of my weight on it. I felt it bend a little, and then the box upset, spilling lures about the bottom of the boat and under the grating. Taking off my shoes. I set them out on the log and shoved off with the oar.

I paddled until I was headed outward, and then cranked the motor. Idling down to slow speed, I pointed the bow straight across toward the weed beds along the other shore. When I was nearly half-way across I stood up and dived over the side. I came up, and the boat was drawing away, a diminishing shadow on the dark surface of the water as the motor kept up its thrumming sound in the night. It was swinging to the right, I thought. It didn't matter much where it hit something and came to rest, but I hoped it wouldn't double back and run me down.

I got my bearings and started swimming back to the cove. When I waded out of the water and sat on the log to put my shoes on I tried to judge where it was now. It sounded as if it were on the other side, and it didn't appear to be moving. Probably it had already plowed into the pails. That was fine.

I stepped ashore, picked up the valise, and returned to the cabin, hurrying now because I wanted to get away from here. Lighting the lamp

again, I put the clothes back in one of the drawers of the chest, and shoved the valise under the bed where he'd got it. I located a paper bag and picked up the shattered glass of the syrup pitcher. I soused his dish towel in the water pail, wrung it out, and mopped up the syrup, dropping the towel in the bag when I had finished. What else. Oh, yes—the plate I had used for an ash-tray. I scraped the butts into the bag, wiped the plate with a handful of paper from the wood-box to remove the rest of the ashes, and put the paper in the fire-box of the stove. Better burn all that, I thought. I stuck a match to it, and then shoved in the carton the money had been in, and the waxed paper that had been used to wrap that hidden under the house. When it had all burned down and gone out, I pulverized the ashes with the poker and replaced the lid. I put the blackened pieces of hardware from Haig's suitcase in the paper bag, shoved the table back where it had been, and looked around. What else? There was nothing to indicate I had ever been here.

Of course, I had left footprints out there in a few places in the hard earth of the yard and in the trail, but it didn't matter, even though my shoes were larger than his. Nobody would be looking for footprints. What had happened to him would be perfectly obvious. He'd stumbled over the tackle box, fallen overboard wearing that gun-belt and gun, and had drowned when the boat plowed on and left him. An autopsy would bear it out.

I picked up the paper bag, blew out the lamp, and went out. When my eyes were accustomed to the darkness again, I walked down to the lake about fifty yards above the cove, and threw the bag out into the water. The hardware and broken glass were heavy enough to make it sink. Picking my way through the dark trees, I went back down to the cove.

I rolled my shirt, trousers, and socks into a bundle and knotted the tie around it. Putting on the jacket and the hat, I picked up the crutch, the three pails and the bundle of wet clothing, and started down the lake through the timber. It was slow going and it was farther this way because I had to follow the shore-line to keep from being lost. Brush scratched my legs, and it required intense and constant alertness to keep from running into tree trunks. The sound of the outboard motor grew fainter behind me. I stopped once to tear the padding from the crutch and dispose of it under a log. A few hundred yards farther along I threw the forked sapling itself into the water. I was conscious that I was tiring, but had no conception of the

passage of time. It could have been twenty minutes or it might have been hours that I'd been wrapped in this furious concentration, impervious to everything except this Problem I was working on. Nothing else existed, or could exist until I was through with it.

I stumbled into an open space and realized I had reached the camp-ground. I swung left, located the road, and in another minute was standing beside the station wagon. The moves remaining in the Problem were dwindling rapidly now, being checked off one by one. I fished the keys from the pocket of my jacket and unlocked the door. Grabbing a flashlight from the glove compartment, I hurried out to where I had hidden the can of gasoline and refueled the car. I replaced the registration certificate. Lifting out the suitcase, stripped off the jacket and wet shorts, and dressed in the slacks and sports shirt I'd had on before.

Like an operating team making a sponge count, I spread out the wet clothes and checked to be sure I hadn't lost anything. It was all there—shirt, tie, socks, trousers, cuff-links, lighter, pocket-knife, wallet, bogus credentials, the sodden remains of the warrant, the brown paper bag containing the ten dollar bills, and even the drowned and mushy package of cigarettes in my shirt. I tossed the paper bag in the suitcase, and put the wallet, knife, and lighter in the pockets of my slacks. Rolling everything else back up in the shirt, I stowed the bundle in the rear of the car.

I took out the knife and pried the lids off the three pails. So oblivious was I to everything but the closing moves of the Problem I scarcely even recognized the paper bundles as money as I hurriedly transferred them to the suitcase. When the pails were empty I put the jacket in the bag on top of the bundles, closed the bag, and stowed it in the car alongside the wet clothes, pulling the blankets and the kapok life-belts over it. Picking up the flashlight and the three pails, I walked back to the edge of the water. I sailed the lids out into it. Then I filled the three pails with water so they would sink, and threw them as far as I could out into the lake. I turned the light on my watch. It was waterproof, and still running after its two immersions in the lake.

It was eight seventeen. The Problem was solved, and all I had to do was go home. I switched off the light and stood there for a moment as the tenseness uncoiled along my nerves. It had been a rough assignment with

tremendous pressure and no margin for error, but I hadn't missed a move. I knew that. It was perfect.

Then, suddenly, I became conscious that something had changed. I turned my head with a puzzled frown, wondering what it was. I hadn't heard anything; all about me was the vast silence of the swamp.

Wait. That was it! It was the silence itself. All this time I had been listening to the thin, faraway drone of the outboard motor without consciously hearing it, and now it had stopped. The motor had run out of fuel at last.

I fought it, but the concentration was all gone now and it was too terrible and too graphic to be denied. It was as if he hadn't died an hour ago, but right now—at this exact instant as the motor made its final revolution and became quiet at last and all movement and life and sound were gone forever from that dark and brooding channel before his cabin.

*“Are you all right, Mr. Ward?”*

It all came up then. I whirled and fell to my knees with my hands in the edge of the water and made a horrible retching sound as I heaved and suffocated with the sting of vomit in my nostrils. When I was wrung out and weak I moved a little and washed my face, and then lay back on the ground, still shaking.

Don't be so damned dramatic, I told myself coldly. You knew beforehand it wasn't going to be any picnic, didn't you? You're not that stupid.

But there wasn't any way I could have known he was going to say that. He just didn't know whether I could swim or not, and he wanted to help me.

After a while, when some of my strength returned, I went back to the station wagon and drove out of the bottom.

## Thirteen

I had only two gallons of gasoline. Trying to get all the way home on that would be too risky, and there probably wouldn't be anything open at Hampstead, so I drove back to Exeter and filled up. It was a few minutes past ten when I got home, fervently glad I had the place all to myself.

People were still up in several nearby houses. I drove on into the garage and closed the overhead door. There was a smaller side door that faced the kitchen porch. I went around to the front of the house and let myself in. I turned on a light in the kitchen, drew the curtains, and brought the suitcase and bundle of clothes in through the back.

Turning on the oven in the kitchen range, I spread the wet trousers and the shirt on the back of a chair before it. The shirt was hopelessly stained with the mushy cigarettes. It would never do to put it in the laundry; according to the best traditions of the mystery story, employees of laundries spent ninety per cent of their time searching for evidence of crimes. Well, I knew several ways to circumvent these sterling but over zealous citizens. I dumped the cigarettes into the sink, rinsed out as much of the stain as possible, and tore off the buttons, which I threw in the refuse can, the one in the house. Then I tore the shirt into handy-sized polishing cloths, saturated them with some of Reba's floor wax, and threw them in the garbage can behind the house.

I went upstairs to the bathroom. With a pair of kitchen shears I cut the black identification folder into scraps and flushed it down the john. The soggy warrant followed it, and then the drowned cigarettes. I took off my shoes and put them on shoe trees to dry naturally in the closet. I put the hat away. Donning a pair of slippers and combing my hair, I went back downstairs and turned the trousers and tie before the oven. When they began to feel merely damp, I broke out Reba's ironing board and electric iron and pressed them carefully. I slid the trousers neatly on to a hanger, added the jacket, and went back to the bedroom. I put the suit away where it

had been and hung the tie back on the rack. I was the only living person who knew Special Agent Ward had ever existed, and now the last trace of him was gone.

I'd saved the best part until last. Taking the suitcase, I went downstairs to the den, drew the curtains over the small windows, and switched on the reading lamp beside the big chair. I dragged over my trunk and emptied it of the accumulation of books and papers and old clothes I'd never quite got around to throwing away. Then I hunted up a pad and pencil and opened the suitcase.

I piled it on the floor first, separated into individual stacks of hundreds, fifties, twenties, tens, and fives, writing down the amounts printed on the bands and hoping Cliffords had been correct in his count. He hadn't, but it was even better. The total when I added it came to \$103,500. I added the \$2,800 still in the paper bag.

That made a grand total of \$107,300. I stared at it and whistled softly. It was all mine, *and nobody on earth knew I had it*. I wondered if anybody else in all history had ever pulled off a coup this size entirely alone and without even the suspicion of one other human being. When you stopped to examine it, the thing must be without parallel. It wasn't solely that there was no reason anyone should suspect I had it; there wasn't even anybody to *miss* it. That was what made it fantastic. There was absolutely no link between Haig and Cliffords, and none between Cliffords and me, and both Haig and Cliffords were dead. . . .

*If only he had run.* I wanted him to! That's the way I meant it.

I fought down the sick spasm. It passed in a moment. There would be others, plenty of them, but they would pass too. Time didn't wound all heels; it was still the other way around. The only saving grace of cliches was that they were true. It would never go away, of course, but you could live with it if you were being paid enough according to your individual sense of values. Mine, perhaps, would raise more than one eyebrow among the Good Housekeeping crowd, but then I wasn't asking them to live by them; I was merely doing so myself.

I got up to find cigarettes and came back to stare at the pile of money again, excitedly making plans. I'd hold on here for another six months. By that time they would have given up in this area and stopped watching it. Let's see, that would be in February. I'd take it to Florida and put it in

several safe deposit boxes. Cash—that is, currency—was always unusual in any kind of business transaction and likely to attract attention, so I would open several scattered checking accounts, add to them gradually, and eventually consolidate them. I'd lie low until mid-summer, at the very bottom of the season, studying the west coast and the Keys for a good location to buy into a marina in a small way or start one of my own. And once I had a business established it would be easy to convert increasing amounts of currency into investments or use it to enlarge the operation. It was just a matter of going slowly.

I put it into the bottom of the trunk and covered it with the old clothing I'd taken out—ski things I hadn't used for years, a dinner jacket, a uniform, and a couple of double-breasted suits. It would be safe here. They never went into my things, and I had the only key, anyway. I replaced the books and papers, locked the trunk and moved it back against the wall. The key I put into my wallet.

I went back up to the kitchen, made a sandwich, and opened a can of beer. Carrying them into the living-room, I loaded the gramophone with arias from *Eugene Onegin* and *Boris Godunov*. The house was too quiet. After a while I switched it off and went upstairs. I took a shower and lay down naked on the bed. Her note was still pinned to the pillow. I crumpled it and threw it on the dresser, wishing she would come back. A fight would be better than this intense silence. I switched off the light. The moon had come up now and its soft light was slanting in under the honeysuckle about the window.

It hit me without warning. I rolled my face down into the pillow and locked my arms around it, shaking and sick and trying not to make any sound. The picture was a long time going away. There was something stark and forever lost and terrible about it, the boat lying motionless there in the moonlight between the dark walls of the trees as if it were waiting for him to come back and get it.

I sat up and lit a cigarette. It was all right. Conscience was no avenging lion; it was a jackal. It circled you like any other carrion-eating vermin, knowing it had no chance when you were on guard and waiting for the precise moment you were waking up or going to sleep. A couple of bad moments a day were no exorbitant price to pay for a hundred thousand

dollars. Fade, brother. We've done this routine before, and I always outlasted you. Remember?

I awoke once during the night, drenched with sweat and tangled in the sheet as if I had been threshing wildly about. In the morning, when my eyes first opened to the gray coolness of dawn, it was a minute or two before it came back, and when it did it was with a rush of freezing and overwhelming terror. They would catch me; I'd go to the electric chair. Then reason took hold again and it disappeared.

Catch me? There wasn't a chance in the world. How could they? It was absolutely impregnable from every angle. In the first place, Cliffords had merely drowned. An autopsy would prove that, and an examination of his boat would tell them how it happened. And, secondly, I didn't even know him, and had never been to his place.

I shaved and dressed and drove downtown for some breakfast. While I was sitting at the counter in Joey's eating half a melon, Ramsey came in and sat down two stools away.

He nodded and smiled. "How are you this morning, Mr. Godwin?"

"Fine, thanks," I said. "Are you having any luck?" It was a waste of time, I knew, even if I weren't already aware he wasn't having any luck. None of them would tell you what day it was.

"Hmmmm, not much," he replied. He gave his order to the waitress. Then he looked around at me again. "How is the fishing in this area? I understand you're quite an authority."

"I know it pretty well," I said. "It's part of the job, and then I fish a lot myself. You thinking of trying it?"

"I thought I might, when my vacation comes up. What do you think of Sumner Lake?"

I took a sip of my coffee. "Well, it's usually a good bet."

"Have you been up there recently?"

"Yes," I said. "Just a few days ago, in fact. For once, though, it let me down. August is a bad month."

"Oh? Well, I was thinking of early October. Thanks a lot. If I do make it, I'll stop by and talk to you."

"Sure," I said. "Any time. Be glad to help."

The canteloup tasted like asbestos pipe-insulation, but I went ahead and forced it down. I paid the bill and drove over to the store. What was he

after, anyway? Was he checking on me? For some reason I couldn't determine, I suddenly thought of that Russian policeman—what was his name?— who haunted Raskolnikov at every turn.

Nuts, it was merely a coincidence. He just happened to want to go fishing; that's all.

Otis had already opened up and was sweeping down the showroom. He came over and leaned the broom against the showcase to light a cigarette.

"Little trick I picked up in the army," he said. "You watch till you see some brass coming and then grab a broom and sweep like hell."

"Anything happen yesterday?" I asked. "Anybody force his way in and buy something before you could stop him?"

"Oh, sure. Matter of fact, I kept the place open till you were clear out of sight. Sold a five-horse motor. For cash. It's in the safe."

"Good," I said. My heart wasn't in it this morning.

Otis was silent for a moment. He started to turn away, but then appeared to change his mind about it. He balanced the broom on his foot, watching it moodily.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I almost forgot. That guy Nunn called up a couple of hours after you'd left."

"Oh?"

He nodded, still looking at the broom. "Wanted to talk to you, but I told him you'd gone for the rest of the day. So then he wanted to know where."

"What was on his mind?" I asked. I didn't like this much.

"He was crying about the job we did on his motors, as near as I could tell. I tried to get him to let me in on what he thought was the matter with 'em, but he just said he jumped you about 'em when you stayed out there last week."

I looked at him quickly. He was still staring down at the broom. Well, there was Sunday. I could tell him that was when I'd been out there. Then I realized it was no use. Otis knew I'd lied about Sumner Lake. But why was he trying to tell me?

I made no reply. There appeared to be a shortage at the moment.

"Uh, boss," he went on hesitantly, "about that twelve dollars a week you pay me. How much of that would you say was for personal advice?"

"I don't know," I said. "You break it down."

“Well, look. I won a prize once for minding my own business. A whole new bedroom slipper—I think it was the left one. You say the word and I’ll keep right on after the other one.”

“That’s all right,” I said. “Spill it.”

“This Nunn is bad news. Believe me, boss. He’s hairy as hell. This is a little out of my line, but I just figured you might not know about him. He killed four men while he was in the Sheriff’s office over there

“Oh,” I said. I saw it now. Otis thought I was making a play for her. I sighed softly in relief. Well, it would look that way. We’d been here alone when she came for the motors, and then I’d taken off right after her. And she’d been calling here for me.

“I guess that’s about all,” he said. “No offense intended.”

“Of course not,” I replied. “Thanks.”

“Maybe I just got used to you. If something happens to you, I got to go looking around for some other slave-driving skinflint to exploit me.”

“I’d never forgive myself,” I agreed. I felt a lot better. “Suppose you fell into some evil dive where they expected you to work?”

“Sure,” he replied. You could see he was relieved, and glad to be through with it. “Like I was telling the old lady just this morning. Where else they got a pension plan that you can retire and live free in the dog pound as soon as you’re a hundred and five? I get this lump in my throat every time I think about it. . . .”

We had it all settled without getting weepy about it. I was to stay out of the sack with Mrs. Nunn. He went back to sweeping. I checked yesterday’s receipts, made up the deposit, and locked it in the safe. He’d given me a scare there for a moment, but everything was fine. I knew, though, that I was never going to feel entirely at ease until I could clear out of here. Utterly harmless things would be forever making me jumpy when I read the wrong meaning into them. It’d happened twice so far this morning, and it wasn’t nine o’clock. You had to be on guard all the time to keep from giving yourself away. More than one badly wanted man had been picked up by a cop who’d meant to do nothing more than give him a parking ticket.

Fortunately, business was good, so I didn’t have too much time on my hands. At ten I went over and made the bank deposit and had a cup of coffee. When I returned a local car salesman came in to talk about boats and try to sell me a new station wagon.

I was up front alone just after eleven when the telephone rang. Otis looked out the door of the shop, but went back when he saw I was going to answer.

As soon as I picked up the receiver I was glad he had. It was Jewel Nunn.

“Oh, how are you?” I asked, wishing she’d stop this. Being killed by George Nunn would be carrying an alibi too far.

“Are you busy?” she asked.

“Well, fairly so.” If she thought I was going to drive down to Hampstead she was crazy. “You running errands again this morning?”

“No . . . I mean, nothing important. I just thought I’d give you a ring while I was here at the drug store. There was something I wanted to tell you. . . .”

“Sure,” I said. “Fire away.”

“I don’t think I ought to over the phone.”

“Hey,” I protested, “that’s not fair, getting my curiosity all aroused. I wish I could get away, but I just don’t see. . . .”

“Well, it’s not real important, anyway,” she said. “It’s just about Mr. Cliffords. You remember . . .”

I went cold all over and I could feel a thousand needles stabbing at my back. He *couldn’t* have been found yet; even in water that warm his body wouldn’t float this soon. What in hell did she mean?

“Cliffords?” I said, wondering if my voice was all right. “Oh, yes, sure. The little man who reads comic books. What’s he done?”

“It’s not anything much, really. And I don’t think I ought . . .”

“Never mind about Cliffords,” I put in quickly. “I want to see you. Can I, if I can get away?”

“Do you really want to?”

“Of course I do. Look. It may take me about an hour, but I’ll be there. At the same place?”

“All right,” she said softly. “Good-bye, Barney.”

“Good-bye” I hung up and took a deep breath. Relax, I thought. Don’t start walking up the walls. They couldn’t have found him this soon. And what if they have? It doesn’t make a bit of difference. Anyway, it’s just some silly thing she remembered about him.

I went back and leaned against a bench and watched Otis while he worked on a motor. Every minute was like ten. I wanted to yell at him to go on and get his lunch and hurry back. It was a quarter to twelve before he put down the tools and started scrubbing his hands.

He finally left. I prowled the showroom, unable to sit still. It was twelve fifteen when he came back. I stooged around for a few minutes and then announced boredly I'd go get something myself and stop in at the post-office on the way back. I was doing seventy-five when I passed the city limits.

After I made the turn on to the road to Javier I met no other cars. That was good, anyway. I hoped she hadn't given up and left. It had been nearer an hour and a half. I swung into the ruts going off through the pines. Her car was parked under one of the big trees by the little stream. The door was open and she was sitting behind the wheel dressed in something crisp and blue, facing outward with her knees crossed. For one of the few times in my life I was too tense and too hurried to give a well-made leg the critical approval it deserved.

She smiled a little shyly and stood up. She was really nice-looking, and it always helps when you've got good material. I took both her hands in mine and said, "I don't know how you do it. You're always even lovelier than I remembered."

"Now, Barney. Remember. . . ."

I smiled gently. "All right. I'll try harder this time."

"It is nice to see you again."

"You're not making it any easier," I said chidingly. I wanted to shout at her. When in hell was she going to get to Cliffords?

She sat back down on the seat and slid over. I got under the wheel and started to move toward her but she shook her head, not too severely. Well, there always had to be a certain amount of that. Oh, the devil with that. Who cared a damn? How soon could I bring up the subject of Cliffords myself, if I had to?

"We can just talk, can't we?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "As long as I can look at you." I put a finger under her chin and turned her face toward me. "I bet you've had a lot of experience doing that."

"No."

“Yes.” She smiled. “You do it too well.”

“Tell me what you’ve been doing since I saw you last.”

“Not anything very interesting. ...” She stopped abruptly, and then went on. “Mr. Cliffords! I almost forgot about him.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s right. What about him?”

She glanced down at her hands, a little abashed. “Barney . . . I hope you won’t think I just used that for an excuse to . . . to . . .”

I smiled at her. “Of course not, you lovely little goose. But what about Cliffords?”

“It’s the craziest thing you ever heard of,” she said. “He’s been arrested by the F.B.I.”

## Fourteen

Say something, I thought. Do something. Don't just sit here; she's staring at you. Look, maybe she's the one who's crazy. Maybe she dreams up things like that, and you're supposed to make some remark like, "Well, I never. . ." We were in nine feet of water. At least nine feet, and he lost consciousness, and was sinking to the bottom. . . .

"Arrested him?" I asked stupidly, "Why?"

"I told you it was crazy," she said calmly. "You'll never believe it. You remember a man named Haig that held up a bank, a year or so ago? He got away with a lot of money, and then they lost him."

A flight of jet planes roared around inside me, and any moment they would fly out through the top of my head. Maybe they would light up and spell out something.

"I think I read about it." I could hear myself going on with the conversation, and I sounded all right. "But what did Cliffords have to do with that?"

"He had the money," she explained with the serene logic of the utter lunatic. "How he got it is kind of a long story, but anyway they found it out and arrested him."

"Let me get this straight," I interrupted. "You mean the F.B.I. told you they'd arrested . . . ?"

"No," she said calmly. "Mr. Cliffords told me."

They tapped the frame then. All the little pieces turned over and the picture was there entire, complete down to the last brush stroke. Even as I felt myself going numb. I had to admit there was a terrible sort of beauty about it that was fascinating. Cliffords had sent me to the electric chair, and the way he had done it was consistent and utterly predictable if you knew him. He was proud of being arrested by the F.B.I.

So I *had* heard a motor start.

“Tell me about it,” I said. It didn’t seem to make much difference now, but it would be interesting to learn what she was doing up there. I didn’t have anywhere to go, anyway. Even thinking about trying to run was farcical.

“Could I have a cigarette?” she asked.

“Sure.”

We each took one, and I lit them.

She smiled at me with a kind of shy delight above the flame of the lighter and said, “This is the funniest thing, actually. I mean . . . I never really thought I’d ever get to know you.”

“Know me?”

“Umh-umh. The first time you ever saw me was when I came in to get those motors, I guess. But I’ve seen you lots. Around Wardlow, I mean. I spend the night there once in a while with this friend of mine—she’s really my second cousin. And a friend of hers used to work for you. Barbara Renfrew. She’s the prettiest thing, isn’t she?”

“I guess so,” I said. I was going back to being crazy again. Nothing made any difference, really. Somehow Barbara Renfrew had wandered into this chase sequence and we were all going around like a clip out of a Laurel and Hardy movie—Haig, the F.B.I., Cliffords, and somebody’s second cousin. No, it was really two different stories. This taffy-maned screwball had a girlish crush on me or something, and wanted to get in line if I was no longer laying Barbara Renfrew. No wonder the poor girl had quit, I thought. Maybe they even thought Otis was sleeping with me. Well, why not? He thought I was with her. This one, I meant.

“And I think your wife is absolutely gorgeous,” she went on,

“When will she be back?”

I gave up then. The only thing to do was go back and start over. Then, suddenly, my mind began to clear again and I saw something I had overlooked before. At best, it was the most tenuous wisp of hope imaginable, but I reached out for it desperately. She *had* said she thought Cliffords was a little off his trolley.

“Oh,” I said. “She’s supposed to be back some time this week. But about Cliffords. When did he tell you all this?”

“Yesterday evening, up at his cabin.”

“And he’d already been arrested?”

"Yes. That's right. And that's when he told me why. I mean, about the money."

I stared at her unbelievingly. "You mean he was under arrest at the time? And these F.B.I. men just stood there and let him tell you all about it? I thought a prisoner wasn't allowed to talk to anybody but his lawyer. . . ." Here was old Barney Blackstone again.

"No," she replied. "There was only one F.B.I. man, and he wasn't really there. He'd hurt his leg when they were out there digging up the money, and Mr. Cliffords was making him a crutch."

"Then you didn't see him at all?"

"No. I was only there a few minutes."

"Oh," I said. "Cliffords just told you he was under arrest? But he was wandering around alone."

"That's right, Barney. You see, he had to take the crutch and some bandages out there where the F.B.I. man was hurt. He couldn't walk."

"Oh," I said again, frowning. "Well, I suppose. . . . Aw, I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"I was thinking of what you told me about him. That he was a little—you know. He might have just dreamed it up. Or got it from one of those comic books."

"No," she said. "He was telling the truth, all right."

"How do you know he was?"

"I saw the man's coat there on the bed, when we went in to wrap up the fish. And Mr. Cliffords showed me some of the money, in a paper bag."

Well, it was a good try, I thought. But it wouldn't have worked, anyway; she didn't have to be able to prove it. Just whisper it down a well. Roughly half the F.B.I. agents in the State would be down there looking for Cliffords in another few hours. The other half would be looking for me. If they weren't already.

"What were you doing up there?" I asked. We might as well talk; that's what we'd come out here for.

She puffed on the cigarette and tapped ashes out of the window. "Well, sometimes when I do an errand for him I take the stuff on up there, just for the boat ride and to get away from that camp for a few minutes. And then, he pays me."

So that's why she had had that other twenty.

“And George and I’d had a—well, a fight. He’d gone off to town. That was a little while after I’d got back from Exeter. I had to get away from the place or go crazy. Maybe I was a little scared, too; he can be pretty mean sometimes, and I didn’t want to be there when he came back if I could help it. So, anyway, when it was late in the afternoon and Mr. Cliffords still hadn’t come down to get his glasses. . . .”

“Glasses?”

She nodded. “The poor old soul can’t read a word without ‘em. He’d dropped his old ones and one of the lenses had come out. He thought he had a spare set, but when he went to look . . .”

I closed my eyes. They could kill you, but did they have to do this first?

“. . . anyway, he found out he’d lost the spare ones so he came down Monday morning and asked me if I’d pick him up another set in Exeter. You remember, when I called you that was where I was going. They have his prescription there at the Berg Brothers.”

You had to admit it. Purely as a work of art it was perfect. There wasn’t a flaw, or a superfluous brush stroke. It had all the cold and functional beauty of a cobra coiled to strike.

“What did George think about it?” I asked.

“Oh, he doesn’t know about it yet. Unless he heard it in town.”

I kept my face perfectly still. “You mean you didn’t tell him?”

She shook her head. Her eyes were moody. “No. We had a fight, like I told you. We haven’t spoken since”

Don’t hope yet, I thought. I was almost afraid to breathe. “How about the other people you told? The ones who knew him, I mean? I bet they were surprised to know he had that money all the time.”

“The people in Hampstead wouldn’t know him,” she said. “I haven’t told anybody but you.”

I was limp, and wanted to put my head and arms down on the steering wheel and just rest. But what now? There was no way I could stop her from telling somebody else, and the instant she breathed one word of it anywhere in this country swarming with F.B.I, agents. . . . Was I any better off? It was just slower this way, prolonging the agony. No. No, no, no. I had to turn her off some way. But how? I couldn’t ask her not to say anything about it. She wasn’t that stupid. She’d guess.

Well. I’d stopped Cliffords, hadn’t I?

Jesus Christ, no. Not that. Not ever again. . . . I'd rather go on and get it over with. Not this kid. . . . She trusted me. She practically followed me around because she thought I was something special.

Well? Hadn't Cliffords? *Are you all right, Mr. Ward?*

Stop it, I thought. I felt sick.

"Didn't he come home at all last night?" I asked.

"Yes. But it was late."

Then he didn't even know she'd been up there at all. Wait. . . . The warning bell was ringing in my mind. It was something she'd said. "*—to wrap up the fish.*" That bass! That big bass Cliffords had caught, the one I thought he'd thrown back into the lake.

"You said something a minute ago," I prompted her. "Something about a fish. What did that have to do with it?"

"Oh. It was a great big thing Mr. Cliffords had caught. He insisted on me taking it. He said George might like to have it mounted to put in the lunchroom."

Well, we were back where we started.

"Didn't George ask you where it came from?"

She shook her head. "I guess I wasn't very nice. I didn't want to take him any fish. But I couldn't hurt the old man's feelings. When I got down to the lake I threw it away."

I couldn't take much more. This yo-yo routine was too rough.

There was something else that didn't jibe, too, but maybe it didn't matter. Cliffords had said he'd phone her from the jail to collect his stuff and sell some of it. But she'd just been there. Why hadn't he told her then; Probably didn't think of it until she'd gone, I thought.

"Does George know where you are now?" I asked. "I mean, does he know you came to Hampstead?"

She shook her head. "He's up the lake. Guiding for a man."

In other words, it was now or never. Nobody knew where either of us was.

*Why?* I thought in agony. Why did they do it; Both of them—Cliffords, and now this kid—cut you off at every turn. You'd think they had spent a year studying the precise moves to back you into a spot from which you could *not* escape without killing them. They insisted on it; they left you no choice at all.

I had to do something. I couldn't sit here all day trying to make up my mind.

"Barney," she said quietly, "I get afraid of him when he's like he was last night. He thinks there's something between us. We know there's not, but . . ."

But there could be. She might as well have said it.

Then, suddenly, I got it. The whole thing solved itself at once. Of course I couldn't do anything to her, even if I were able to bring myself to do it. There was another reason. Nunn suspected us; so did Otis. If anything happened to her, the police would pick me up for questioning within hours.

But if you merely turned it around, it fell right into place for me. It was made to order. All I had to do was get her out of the country. Today. Now, before she had a chance to speak to one other living person. Run away with her. Sure, they'd know we had gone together, but that just made it better. Wouldn't that answer all Ramsey's questions at once, if he had any? I didn't know anything about Haig's money; all I'd been doing was chasing some other man's wife.

I turned and gave her a long, somber look. "Do you mean that?"

"What, Barney?"

"About being afraid of him?"

"I don't know really. But . . .

"You've got to leave him," I said. "We're going away together."

She stared. "We—we can't do that."

I caught both her arms. "Today," I said harshly. "You're not going back there at all. If he ever hurt you I'd kill him."

"Barney, you're squeezing my arms . . ."

I turned them loose and dropped my head contritely. "I'm sorry," I said. I took a deep breath and exhaled it shakily, still looking down at my hands clenched in my lap. "I—I've got to tell you something, Jewel. You've never been out of my mind since that first minute I saw you. Wait. . . . I know how crazy it sounds. Of course it's been only a little over a week. But don't you see? Time has no meaning any more. It would be the same in five minutes, or a thousand years."

"Barney . . ."

"Let me finish, please. I've got to tell you this. I see you everywhere I turn. I lie awake at night seeing you. I pass women on the street that are tall,

or have eyes almost that same . . ." gray, I thought, ". . . sea-mist shade of gray, or a little gesture of the hand, or a line somewhere, or one random fragment of grace that reminds me of you, and then you're all around me. It's so terribly real I could almost reach out and touch you. Do you know what that's like, or how long you can stand it?"

I glanced up at her then. I was in, all right. You could see it in the hushed and tremulous expression and the softness of the eyes as she studied my face. From here on it was only a mopping-up operation.

"I love you, Jewel," I said. I kissed her, and her arms went up about my neck, clinging fiercely. I kissed the closed eyelids, and moved my lips across her cheek to whisper in her ear, "Darling, darling. Oh, darling. . . ."

\* \* \*

"But, Barney, we've got to take time to think. This is all so fast."

"There's nothing to think about. We're going away this afternoon. Look. We'll go to Florida. We can both get divorces there, and we'll be married. I've got some money of my own, and I'll get a job. You'll be out of that swamp, where you can wear decent clothes, and be around people."

She stirred a little in my arms. "All right, Barney. I know it's wrong, but I guess I can't help it either. I'll go with you anywhere."

You're wonderful."

"Do you want me to meet you in Sanport? I could take the bus."

"No," I said. "I don't want to be away from you that long. We'll go together. We'll go back to town and I'll cash a check, and put my stuff in the car."

She pushed a little away from me and glanced up. "But I'll have to pack. . . ."

"I don't want you to take anything. I want to buy you everything new. And choose it all myself."

"But there are some pieces of jewelry my mother gave me. And pictures. Things I've got to take."

I thought swiftly. She probably wouldn't leave without the usual flotsam and sentimental rubbish women always clung to with such mulish perversity. At least, not without an argument that would take longer than going after them.

“You’re sure he’s up the lake?” I asked. “There’s no use having a nasty scene or maybe a fight.”

She nodded. “He’s fishing with some man. It’ll only take me a few minutes to pack what I want to take. Do you want me to meet you here?”

“I’ll go with you,” I said.

“You don’t have to.”

“From now on,” I said, “you go nowhere without me, you tawny-haired angel.” At least, not till we got out of this country. “And, besides, we could leave your car there.”

“All right,” she said.

She drove fast. I stayed close behind her. We met no one at all on the road, but after we made the turn-off and were down in the bottom almost to the camp we had to pull over for a car that was coming out. There was a man in it alone, and he wore a long-visored fishing cap. I frowned, not caring much for it. But she should know whether or not that was the man he was guiding, and she continued on. I followed.

We came around the last bend and into the clearing. It was quiet and deserted except for a late model Ford parked near the cabins. She stopped, and I turned around so I’d be headed out toward the highway.

When we got out I nodded toward the Ford. “Is that his car? The man he’s fishing with?”

She looked doubtful. “I’m not sure. There were two different men, and one of them went out alone. I don’t remember which was which.”

“Well, we’re here. Let’s get started.”

We walked over to the lunch-room. It was open, except for the screen door.

“I locked up when I left,” she said.

Well, it couldn’t be helped. If we ran into him, it was going to be a lot more awkward on account of my being with her, but that was the way it bounced. I had to be sure she hadn’t talked to anybody. I opened the screen and we went in. The room was empty. He could be in back, I thought, but presumably he would have heard us by this time and come out. She hesitated, and I knew she didn’t like the idea of going in to see, but I couldn’t help her there. It was bad enough this way, but if he came in and found the two of us in their bedroom the whole thing was apt to turn hairy in large quantities.

He didn't strike me at all as the well-we-might-as-well-be-civilized type. "It's so quiet," she said.

I'd noticed that, and usually liked more noise myself. I was about to say something when the screen door opened quietly behind us and he came in. God alone knew where he'd been. Under the best of circumstances his face wasn't anything you'd need in your dreams unless you wanted to grate a coconut, but now there was a frozen savagery about it I didn't like at all.

He didn't say anything. He leaned against the door jamb and looked dangerous. He was good at it.

She was behind me. "I'm leaving, George," she said.

Nothing moved except his lips. "You figure you'll be better off with glamor-boy here?

"I'm going away," she said. "That's the only thing that matters, isn't it?"

"Get a place with a back door," he said. "So you can both keep in practice."

"Look, Nunn," I broke in. "There hasn't been . . ."

"Shut up," he said. I'll get to you in a minute."

"Go pack your bag," I told her. "You've told him you're leaving. That's all that's necessary."

She turned and went through the doorway behind the counter. He started to come toward me. I was blocking his way at the opening between the counter and showcase.

"She's afraid of you," I said. "Stay out of there and leave her alone."

I could see he didn't have a gun. He wore nothing except a pair of dungarees and a sweaty T-shirt. He looked like something carved out of knotty wood.

"You forget whose place this is?" he asked.

"No," I said. "But why don't you stop acting like an idiot. All she's doing is leaving. It happens every day."

"Yeah. It does with you around, sport."

He made no move to swing at me, or go past. Instead he stepped down the counter and leaned over it. When he straightened he had a hunting knife in his hand. It had a thin and wicked blade about eight inches long.

He started back toward me. "You want to see what a man looks like standing in his own guts?"

He meant it. He wasn't the bluffing kind. I backed up a step. There was nothing under the counter or in the showcase I could hold him off with. I didn't like it at all any more. About one more step backward and I'd be in that hallway on the other side of the door, and in the close quarters there I was going to have knife in me somewhere no matter what I did.

Then something slid past my side, just under my right arm. It was a .45 automatic. I grabbed it from her hand and leveled it at him. Instead of stopping, he lunged at me, and I knew the chamber wasn't armed. It was his gun, of course, and if she had armed it we'd have heard her. There wasn't time. I swung it at the side of his head and was lucky enough to connect. He fell into me like a bum tackle, rolled off, and fell to the floor. She cried out behind me.

"Get back," I snapped at her.

Instead, she came on past me, stepped over his legs, and went around the counter. She sat down on one of the stools and put her face down in her arms. She was just weak and sick.

I bent over him and felt his head where the trickle of blood showed on his scalp above the left ear. There was no fracture. He groaned and stirred his legs. I picked up the knife and tossed it back on the shelf under the counter. Straightening up, I pulled the slide of the gun back to arm it. A cartridge flew out. I looked down at him and shook my head. He was a rough type. It took guts to charge a gun you knew was ready to shoot.

"He have any more guns around here?" I asked.

She sat up. Her face was pale and very still. I supposed as a way to break up house-keeping in the old urbane manner this could stand a little polishing. I'd had enough of it myself; I'd never cared much for these muscle routines.

"Two," she said. "A rifle and a shotgun."

"Maybe you'd better bring 'em out."

They were a 30.30 and a Model 12 shotgun. I went down and threw them in the lake off the end of the float. It was a shame to treat good guns like that, but this thing was sour now for fair. They'd probably have been able to kiss it off with nothing but a double order of frozen silence all around if she'd been alone; but after that humiliation he'd kill either or both of us if he could.

I went back. She was coming out the screen door with her overnight bag. When I looked inside he was moving. He had his head and shoulders against the wall and was trying to inch his way up. A bright thread of blood ran down the corded neck and into his T-shirt. He looked at me, but said nothing. I turned and went out. She was putting her bag in the car. I looked back at him before I let the screen door slam, and he was on his feet, weakly clutching the end of the counter and vomiting.

I was getting behind the wheel when I heard the door slam again. He walked unsteadily toward us as I reached for the starter, and stopped about ten feet away, staring at both of us.

It didn't seem to be a situation that called for a great deal in the way of conversation. I pressed the starter and we drove on out of the bottom.

## Fifteen

I stopped once and threw the .45 out into the timber at the side of the road.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m sorry it had to be that messy.”

“It’s all right,” she said. She was looking a little better now, but she didn’t want to talk about it. Neither did I.

I thought swiftly as I gunned the car back toward Hampstead and the highway. It has to be done just right now, and in as natural a way as possible. If we were running away together, we wouldn’t flaunt the fact all over town. We’d meet somewhere and simply go, knowing it would be a matter of public knowledge within hours, anyway. And I could not let her talk to anybody, anybody at all under any circumstances, until we were away from here. The only thing to do was take her home and leave her there while I cashed the check and made the last trip to the shop.

She didn’t have to be seen going in. The three houses along that street were old ones that went in for privacy. They were on big lots, heavily planted, with a fenced alley at the rear. I could take her in that way. No, I thought. Why be silly about it? Overdoing the cloak-and-dagger would be carrying it too far in the other direction. We’d merely drive right into the garage and go out through the side door and into the kitchen. It was only four or five steps, and could be seen only from the house directly across the street. If Mrs. Macklin happened to be looking out the window at just that moment, who cared? We were merely being clandestine, not furtive. It’d give her a chance to sound “Boots and Saddles” after we were gone, and harry on the pack.

I made the turn on to the highway. Jewel put a hand on mine on the steering wheel and moved a little closer. She glanced up and smiled faintly. “It won’t take long, will it, Barney? I mean, before we can start?”

“No,” I said. “An hour or two, at the most. You won’t mind waiting for me at the house, will you?”

She shook her head. “That will be all right.”

I swung off the main drag in the outskirts of town and circled to get on Minden at the outer end. The house was the second from the corner on Underhill, a short side street that intersected it. I made the turn into Underhill, and then swung into the driveway. The garage door was open. I went on in.

Patting her on the hand, I said, "Sit tight for just a minute."

I pulled down the garage door and let myself in at the front of the house. Going on through, I unlocked the kitchen door and stepped out to the garage again. She had already got out and was standing there with her bag. I took it and followed her in.

The curtains were drawn in the kitchen and the Venetian blinds closed in the dining- and living-rooms. We went on through to the living-room and I put down her bag.

She dropped her purse on the coffee table and turned. I caught her to me and kissed the upraised lips and closed eyes and then whispered rapturously against her ear, "Darling, darling; it won't be long," at the same time reminding myself she probably wouldn't want to get very sweaty about it here, under the circumstances, and that there was a lot to be done.

She surrendered to it for an instant, and then began pushing me away, breathless and confused but radiantly happy. "No, Barney. No. Let's hurry and get started."

"All right, sweet," I said. "Make yourself comfortable."

She sat down on the sofa near the phonograph and took a cigarette from her bag. I lit it for her. She smiled and said, "It's so wonderful it's like a dream."

I turned toward the stairs, and then stopped, struck by an odd thought.

"Look," I asked, "how did you know she was gone?"

She smilingly shook her head at me. "It was in the paper, silly. Don't you ever look at it?"

"Oh," I said. I went on up the stairs. Well, there was that to be said for having a rich wife; you could always read the paper and find out what she was doing. I grabbed two of my suitcases from the hall closet, took them into the bedroom, and began throwing clothes into them. It required less than a minute to see I was never going to get more than a quarter of my personal gear into them. And I needed the other bag for the money; it was the only one to which I hadn't lost the key.

Well, why not ship the trunk? I could put the money in that other bag, throw away most of the useless rubbish that was stored in it now, and pack it with things I wanted to take. I could leave it on the kitchen porch and phone to have it picked up and forwarded collect care Railway Express in Miami. Right. That was it.

I picked up the other bag from the closet and hurried down the stairs. She was still on the sofa. I made the circle sign with the thumb and forefinger of my right hand and said, "I'm gaining on it," as I hurried on toward the kitchen. She looked up and smiled, but remained where she was.

Down in the den, I pulled the trunk away from the wall and unlocked it. Just as I was about to throw the first of the stuff out, I looked at my watch. I whistled. It was two twenty. The bank closed in ten minutes. And I had to cash that check. Sure, I had over a hundred thousand dollars right here under my hand; but how would it look to the F.B.I., in case they investigated, if I ran off like this without bothering to withdraw any of the over fifteen hundred I had in my personal current account? I couldn't speak for them, but I knew it would look damned suspicious to me.

I slammed the trunk shut and hurried back up the stairs. "Have to get to the bank before it closes," I called out to her from the door of the dining-room. "I'll be back as soon as I can, sweet."

She smiled and waved. "Please hurry, darling."

I went out the kitchen door and backed the car out of the garage. Luck was with me and I found a parking place right across the street from the bank.

I made a quick calculation of my balance and wrote out a check for \$1,540. Arthur Pressler gave it to me in fifties and twenties, looked up once as if to ask me why I was withdrawing my account, and then decided it wasn't efficient to indulge in such human foibles as curiosity. I glanced at my watch and stopped in Joey's for a quick cup of coffee. He waited on me himself.

He was a fat and humorous man with six or seven long hairs combed diagonally across a head as slick and shiny on top as a steel roller bearing, and he was the best wing shot I have ever seen. I'd hunted quail with him a lot.

"Hey, Barney," he asked genially, "what's with you and these F.B.I. jokers?"

I just saved spilling the coffee. "Why?"

"A quiet type named Ramsey. He's been in here twice pumping me about you. Where you came from, how long you been here, all that routine. You applied for a Federal job?"

"Oh," I said. "Something like that. It's indefinite yet."

"Well, you're in, boy. With the send-off I gave you, you can have Hoover's job. You think that boy's not honest, I said, there's been a paved street in front of his house for two years now, and the last time I looked it was still there. . . ."

"You're a real pal," I said. I put a dime on the counter and went out, feeling uneasy for no reason I could pin down. Ramsey didn't have anything to work on. That's the reason he was poking around here asking silly questions. He was outside in the cold; the moat was filled and the drawbridge was up. But still I didn't like it; he made me nervous with that knack he had of seeming to be there at my elbow every time I turned around, as if ubiquity were an end in itself. What was the name of that Russian detective in *Crime and Punishment*? Rock. Something like rock.

I shrugged it off; that was some private eye. Private eyes always had virile names like Rock and Mike. That way you could tell how tough they were.

I drove over to the store. It was twenty to three. When I went in, Otis was out in the showroom where he could keep an eye on the front door, rubbing down the wax on a runabout hull. He saw me and went on back to the shop. I looked around, wondering why I had come back; there wasn't anything I had to do here. Otis had a key; he'd open it in the morning, and when I didn't show up he'd call his boy to come in. They'd keep it going until she came back from wherever she was and whatever she was doing; in fact, he could probably take over and run it for her. He knew the business, and he was so honest Diogenes could have put out his lantern and found him in the dark. Maybe he didn't know how to get out and keep a fire burning under those prospects, or how to work the publicity angles so they'd talk about you and know where you were, but he'd do a good solid job of running a business for her. . . . I stopped. What the hell did I care what she did with the place? She could grind it up for cat food.

I heard tires on the gravel outside, and looked around. Ramsey was getting out of his car with his briefcase in his hand. Maybe there are really

several of him, I thought; there might be a Ramsey-duplicating machine somewhere that somebody'd forgotten to turn off. Well, in about another hour he could start looking around for somebody else to haunt.

He came in. "Good afternoon, Mr. Godwin," he said in that courteous and unhurried way he had.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Ramsey." We should have mint juleps and goatees.

"I was hoping I'd catch you in."

Now what had he meant by that! Was he implying I did an inordinate amount of running around, or that he thought I was trying to dodge him?

"I'd like to take a few more minutes of your time, if you're not too busy."

"Certainly," I said. We went back to the office and I sat down in the swivel chair behind the desk. He took the one in front of it and opened the briefcase.

"I hate to keep interfering with your work all the rime," he said. "But I still have hope we may eventually stumble on to a lead as to who spent that twenty-dollar bill here. The mystifying thing is that just one should show up. There should have been more, somewhere in this area."

I frowned. "The only thing I can see is that he must have been a transient." I wondered what the devil had become of those I'd put on the bus. There should have been some action up there by this time, you'd think.

He nodded. "Yes, that's a possibility, of course. Among others."

I read you, Mr. Ramsey. This is the needle. Otherwise you wouldn't have told me there were no others; the F.B.I. doesn't go around throwing out information like some neighborhood gossip. You mean there should have been others if the person passing it hadn't been warned the F.B.I. was after him.

"Well," I said hopefully, "can you think of any new approach? I've racked my brains. . . ."

No. Except that I wanted to pass along to you the request we're making of all the merchants in the area, and that is to be on the lookout for any currency, new or old, that appears to be stained in an unusual manner. . . ."

"Stained?"

He nodded. "A reddish-brown discoloration. Similar to rust stains. If you come across any, I'd appreciate your calling us immediately and

making a note of who gave it to you.”

“Sure. Of course,” I said. “Anything else?”

He smiled. “Just some more pictures, if you can spare the time.”

He must have had fifty or more. They were just props, I was pretty sure, but I went through them carefully in spite of the fact I was impatient to get away. Haig was there again.

“I have a vague impression I’ve seen that one somewhere,” I said. “But I don’t know where, or when.”

He nodded. “I see. Lately, do you think?”

“No. I’m not even sure I have seen him, but if I did it must have been a long time ago.”

He put them back in the briefcase and stood up, holding out his hand. “I want to thank you again for your co-operation, Mr. Godwin. We appreciate it.”

“Not at all,” I said. “I wish I could be of more help.” We shook hands and I followed him out to the front door.

He stopped and turned just before he went out. “I’m still hoping to get away for that fishing trip in October,” he said. “What do you think of Javier Lake?”

I managed to keep my face expressionless. “Well, I haven’t fished it a great deal myself,” I said. “But they say it’s usually pretty good, especially after the water starts to turn cool.”

He nodded. “Well, thanks a lot.”

He drove off. I remained rooted there by the showcase, thinking swiftly. Maybe I was playing right into their hands. Suppose they suspected me, for some reason, but knew they were going to have a hard time digging up any proof? Wouldn’t they try to scare me into making a break, knowing I’d have the stuff with me and that they’d merely have to search the car? I had to leave it here. Hide it somewhere; even bury it again. I could come back for it six months or a year from now, when the heat was gone. It wouldn’t take that long, actually; as soon as they were convinced she was the only thing I’d been after . . .

I stopped. If they searched the car, *she’d* be in it. *You mean you’re looking for Mr. Haig’s money? Why, I thought you got that when you arrested Mr. Cliffords.* Oh, sweet Jesus.

All right, I had her. Now what was I going to do with her? Put her on a bus, at least until Sanport? I looked at my watch. There was one through in about twenty minutes. But she might talk to somebody, some local. Which was the less risky? Wait. . . . If she weren't with me, what were they supposed to think I was running for? No. She had to go in the car with me. That was the only way. Actually, the chances were that if they did stop me they wouldn't even say what they were after. They'd just look.

But at any rate, I had to get that money disposed of before we left. I could find something waterproof at the house to put it in, and take it out in the country somewhere. I'd tell her I had to do one more errand. She could wait at the house. But I had to get started. Was I going to stand here all day?

I called out to Otis. He stuck his head out the door at the rear. "I'm going home," I said. "Probably won't be back." "Right," he said.

I wished there was some way I could say good-bye to him, but there didn't appear to be any under the circumstances. I went out. Just as I was getting in the car around at the side of the building I thought I heard the telephone ringing. I went on. He came running out the front door waving his arm as I drove off, but I looked straight ahead, pretending not to see. I didn't have time to answer the phone. When I came to the street and was about to drive into it, I had to wait for a car coming from my left. It was a police car, one of those belonging to the Sheriff's Department. It didn't go past, however; it turned in, and stopped right alongside me.

It was Grady Collins, the deputy who was stationed here in Wardlow. He was a stocky and pleasant-faced younger type of about twenty-five, a Marine Corps veteran of the Korean war.

He pushed the white hat back on his head and grinned. "Hi, Barney. I was just headed for your place."

"What's on your mind, Grady?" I asked. Why didn't some lab come up with a liquid cop-repellant you could rub on yourself?

"You don't know a guy named Nunn, do you? George Nunn?"

What now? "Well, I've seen him once or twice. Why?"

Before he could answer, I heard somebody running across the gravel behind me, and looked back. It was Otis.

"Long distance call for you," he said. "From Felton."

As far as I knew, I didn't know anybody in Felton. Nor want to.

"Tell the operator to transfer it home," I said. "In five minutes or so. Thanks, Otis." He turned and went back.

"What about this Nunn?" I asked Collins. If I ever got out of this place maybe I ought to take a vacation.

"I don't know. He sounds Asiatic. Called up a little while ago with some goofy line of crap his wife's with you and he wants her picked up so he can talk to her. Get her to come back."

What was his angle in that? Oh. Trying to delay us until he could get hold of another gun and start looking for us.

"With me?" I said. "Where'd he call from? Some opium den?"

Collins grinned and shook his head. "You got me, pal. From that camp of his, I guess. Anyway, you haven't seen her, have you?"

"No," I said.

"Well, that's what I told the meat-head. Also that I couldn't pick her up, anyway, unless he came in and swore out a complaint. If he calls back, I'll tell him to go sleep it off. Brother, this job."

"Well, I'll see you," I said.

He lifted a hand and grinned. "See you, Barney."

I hit the light green crossing Main and was home in two minutes or less. I put the car in the garage, pulled down the overhead door, and started in the front of the house. Just as I was going up the steps I remembered I hadn't called the express company. Well, I'd do that now. God, would I ever get away from here? And what was I going to pack that money in? It had to be something waterproof. And I'd have to come up with something to tell her, some new errand.

I stepped into the living-room, and looked around in surprise. She wasn't there. "Jewel," I called.

There was no answer. Maybe she'd gone upstairs to the bathroom. I called again, a little louder, and received only silence in reply. There were four cigarettes, smeared with lipstick, in the ash-tray she had been using. I turned toward the dining-room. There was her overnight bag, lying on its side under the edge of the table. I stepped quickly over and looked in.

She wasn't there, but two of the chain were overturned. And near them lay one of her shoes.

I began to run then. I took the stairs three at a time and made the turn into the bedroom so fast I almost lost my balance and crashed into the wall.

She was on the bed, lying face up with most of her clothes torn off and the cord of my electric razor around her throat. I took one look at her and headed for the bathroom. I fell to my knees in front of the John and tried not to be sick.

The telephone began ringing downstairs. It went on and on.

My arms shook as if with a bad chill as I braced myself against the wall. I had to get out of there, to some place where I could think. Away from her. I kept seeing her, even behind me and with my eyes closed.

The police, I thought. I had to call the police so they could catch the unspeakable son of a bitch and hang him before he could get out of the country. The phone went on ringing. Well, maybe it would stop some day. I got up unsteadily, went through the bedroom without looking at her, and started down the stairs.

It struck me then. Wasn't I overdoing the righteous indignation just a little, and being a trifle dramatic? It hadn't been three hours since I'd been trying to think of some way. . . . I closed my eyes and shuddered. Good God, no. Not like that. Nor any way. I hadn't, had I?

*Hang him? Him?* I stopped dead.

They'd hang me. She was strangled in my bedroom with the cord of my electric razor while my wife was away. That torn clothing— And I had just five minutes ago told the police I hadn't seen her. Right after drawing fifteen hundred dollars from the bank so I could skip the country. Oh, they'd hang Nunn, all right. I'd be lucky if they didn't hand him a gun and tell him to shoot me.

I was at the foot of the stairs. The telephone went on ringing. Maybe if I answered it, it would stop, but I wasn't sure. I picked it up.

"Mr. Godwin?" a bright female voice asked. "We have a long-distance call from Felton."

"I don't know anybody in Felton . . ."

"Barney, darling!" It was Jessica. "Oh, it's good to hear your voice again."

I leaned against the wall. "Where . . .?" I began, and then stopped as it occurred to me in a great burst of deductive reasoning that if she were calling from Felton that must be where she was.

"How are you?" I asked stupidly.

“Just fine, dear. And dying to see you. I’m on my way home now, and I’ll be there in about two hours. I stopped here for a cup of coffee, and I just thought I’d call and let you know.”

“You’ll be here in about two hours?” I could absorb practically anything if it were repeated two or three times. “Good. That’s fine.”

“You lamb. You great, big, beautiful, woolly lamb you. I’ll run now, honey, and be on my way. See you soon.”

“Good-bye,” I said.

I hung up. A very white gesture, I thought. After two years of accusing me of chasing everything in this end of the State that didn’t shave twice a day, she wanted to give me enough advance notice to clear the place of women if I had any here, so there wouldn’t be a fight when she got home. That was really decent. Well, for once she was right. There was one here.

## Sixteen

It was all piling up too fast for me. I stood still for a minute with my face in my hands and tried to think. Did I have any chance at all of convincing them? I didn't have a scratch on me. But, then, neither would Nunn. He'd hit her first and knocked her out, down here in the dining-room, and then after he'd strangled her he faked the assault. It would just be my word against his. I could show them the guns in the lake, and that lump on his head. But what would that really prove? Nothing, except that we'd had a fight. It wouldn't count for much against the fact he had called the police and tried to get them to pick her up so he could talk to her and try to get her to come home. And that I had told the police, after she was already dead in my bedroom, that I hadn't seen her.

I considered that. It was neat, when you thought of it. I'd underestimated him all along, dismissing him as a muscle-brained tough boy, and he'd got me. He knew I'd deny knowing where she was, so I could hang myself. He'd probably called them from right here.

Well, he hadn't quite got me yet. I could get her out of here; it could be done but it wasn't going to be easy, not being able to wait until dark. I had less than two hours. I snapped out of it and ran toward the stairs. It took an effort to go back in that room. The nausea was working on me again, but I had to get the razor cord off her throat. It had been wrapped around twice and then tied in back. I had to look at her face once. Well, she was unconscious, I thought. Maybe that helped; I didn't know.

I worked the cord free and put it back in the bathroom. Going out in the hall, I took a blanket from the linen closet. I spread it on the floor beside the bed and lifted her down on to it. There was no rigidity at all yet, and she was hard to handle. I pulled the torn dress down to cover her with the little dignity there was left to her, and cast about for her underclothes. She still had on the bra, and I found the panties shoved into the rumpled folds of the bedspread. I remembered she hadn't worn stockings, so there would be no

suspender belt. There should be one shoe up here, however. I found it under the bed.

Going downstairs, I picked up the shoe that was in the dining-room and got a roll of heavy cord from a drawer in the kitchen. I was recovering now, and thinking quite clearly. On the way back I stopped in the living-room and picked up the four cigarette butts from the ash-tray, the ones that were smeared with lipstick. I flushed them down the toilet. Putting both shoes and her panties down beside her on the blanket, I folded it over her both ways and then folded the ends in. I knew that I was probably as guilty of the actual fact of her being dead as Nunn was, and while the sadism and brutality were all his, I still felt better after I didn't have to look at her any more. I made several ties around her body with the cord, to hold the blanket in place.

Then I turned my attention to the bed. There'd been surprisingly little blood for a bad beating, but then he'd merely been trying to bruise and puff the face rather than cut it. There was one sizeable spot and two smaller ones on the bedspread, and in one place it had gone through both sheets. I took them all off, washed out the spots in the bathroom, and put them in Reba's laundry bag. Getting new sheets and another spread from the linen closet. I remade the bed, trying to copy the way it had been tucked before.

I took out the two bags I'd packed and put them in the hall closet. The one down in my den didn't matter. Jessica would be here long before I got back, but she wouldn't go down there. I took a last look around. Everything was in order up here. Picking her up with considerable difficulty, I carried her down the stairs and out to the kitchen. I placed her near the door, went out, and closed it behind me.

I studied the distance. It was two steps across the kitchen porch, down two steps to the ground, and then three long strides into the side door of the garage. Situated as it was, with only trees to the rear and the house and garage covering the respective sides, it was exposed to view only from the street and Mrs. Macklin's house directly across it. As I came back from the garage to the kitchen porch I shot a casual glance across at her windows. The drapes were open in the living-room windows and in two of upstairs bedrooms. She was probably home. The garage door was closed. There were no other cars parked in front, so there probably wasn't any bridge

game or catfight in progress. It was hard to tell just what Mrs. 20/20 Snellen would be doing this time of day.

Well, I could give her something to do. As I recalled the layout of her web, her telephone had two extensions, one in the central hallway and the other in the kitchen. Either would do. I went back inside the kitchen, but left the door unlatched.

I was going to have to take a chance on the street, but very few cars went by as a rule. It ended in a cul-de-sac at the end of the next block. I went into the living-room, looked up her number, and dialed it. It rang four or five times. The receiver clicked on the other end and when I heard her say, "Hello," I put this one down and ran. Hoisting up Jewel Nunn's body, I kicked open the door and went out and into the garage. No car went by. I was in the clear.

The end of the station wagon was already open. I put her in, doubled into as small a space as possible, and pulled the blankets and life-belts over her. I went back in the house, replaced the telephone handset, and brought out her overnight case. There was a short-handled gardening spade in the garage. I put it and her purse in under the blankets. Everything was set, except that I'd better leave a note. After she'd called me, it would look a little odd if I didn't. I went back inside once more, scribbled out a few lines to the effect that a man who owed me eighty dollars on an old deal had called from Exeter that I could collect if I'd come after it, and left it on the coffee table. Of course, there would be a fight, anyway. That was news? But she wouldn't have cause to suspect anything. Except that I was still the same miserable bastard she'd been married to for two years.

I locked the front and back doors, and swung up the door of the garage. Taking one last look into the back of the station wagon, I was satisfied with it. It was always full of some kind of camping gear and those old rumpled blankets and life-belts. I glanced at my watch. It was four twenty-five.

I got in and backed out of the garage. Somewhere off that road going into the northern end of Javier Lake, I thought. It would do as well as any. I tried not to think about her. Twenty-four was a lousy time to die. Oh, drop it. It never did any good. This world was a rough place to live in, unless you lived in it one day at a time and never thought of what was gone or what could have happened. You used up Today, threw it back over your shoulder, put your hand around a blind corner, and a little man put another one in it.

Some fine morning you'd shove your hand around the corner and there'd be no little man. Just a seagull with a sense of humor. You couldn't buck a system like that; you joined it.

I might make this stick, and I might not. The best thing would be to continue denying she was ever with me. Nobody could prove it, and Nunn's word didn't carry much weight. If I carried it off successfully I'd hang around another six months or a year before I tried to get away. She'd never tell anybody about Cliffords now.

I swung into Minden. It was only three blocks to the traffic light at Main. I saw I was going to hit it on the green, and speeded up a little, and then the career of Barney Godwin began to come apart like a cheap toy left out in the rain. I smelled the motor just a second before all the bearings began to go, but by that time I was already into the intersection and starting to turn. The clatter of connecting rods and burned-out mains rose to a crescendo, and then the end of a rod came out through the crankcase wall and I was through. The motor locked. tires skidded and made a short screeching sound as I came to a standstill in the middle of the intersection of Main and Minden with traffic piling up around me and horns beginning to blow.

There was a sort of horrible fascination about it, like watching a levee crumble and go out, or seeing an explosion in slow motion in a newsreel. You knew what the end result was going to be, and yet you sat and appraised the individual stages in the sequence of destruction. Pedestrians turned and stared, most of them people I knew. The light changed. More horns took up the outcry. I saw Grady Collins step off the curb and come toward me. He was grinning wryly and shaking his head.

“Barney, he said, “did you ever try putting oil in this heap?”

Then, before I could reply, he called to someone on the sidewalk before the café. “Hey, Gus. Run inside Joey's there and call Manners. Tell him to bring his wrecker and get this clunk of Barney's off the street.”

I got out. If there was anything unusual about my manner or expression he apparently didn't notice it, so perhaps nothing showed. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do, so I merely stood there. He grinned at me again, shook his head ruefully at the car, and began directing traffic around it.

The wrecker came and maneuvered into position. While his helper was hooking on and hoisting the front of the station wagon, Manners glanced briefly under the hood, whistled, and shook his head. Then he got down on hands and knees and peered at the bottom of the motor.

"Crankcase drain-plug is gone, Barney," he said. "Somebody didn't tighten it."

Perhaps, I thought, it *was* news to him. He hadn't had the benefit of my experience. I turned and studied the faces along the sidewalk, searching for Nunn. He probably wasn't expecting it this soon, I thought; there was no way he could have known Jessica was coming home and that I'd have to do it in daylight. No. Wait. There he was, near the middle of the block, peering owlishly at the spectacle while he weaved with a slightly exaggerated drunkenness. No doubt, I thought, it exceeded his fondest hopes.

"If it was me, Barney," Manners said, "I'd just put in a rebuilt motor. What you think?"

"That sounds all right," I said.

"I got a lot of work piled up, so it'll be five or six days."

"There's no hurry," I said. "No hurry at all."

"Phone you an estimate tomorrow. See you, Barney." He got in beside his helper and the twin units of Jewel Nunn's catafalque began to move slowly down the street in the immemorial stance of mating quadrupeds. If only one person could cry, I thought, it wouldn't be so terrible. But at least nobody laughed at her, and maybe that's as close as you ever come to winning.

I went over on the sidewalk. Traffic was beginning to move normally now. Grady Collins waved at me and called out, "Come on, Barney. I'll run you home."

"Thanks," I said. I crossed the street with the light, and just as I was climbing in the patrol car I saw Ramsey. He was standing on the corner in front of the bank staring thoughtfully at nothing.

Granite? I thought. Basalt? Shale? Gneiss? What the devil was it?

We went up Minden. The long gout of the spilled oil was there on the road, running from Main all the way back to Underhill.

"There's where the drain-plug dropped out," Grady said. "Right there. Funny thing to happen, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

“Just wasn’t tightened, and the motor vibration finally screwed it out.”

I nodded. He’d probably left it screwed in about a sixteenth of a turn. He couldn’t find anything to drain it into, and he knew if he let it pour out on the floor of the garage I’d see it when I backed off it.

Grady pulled into the drive so he could turn around. I got out. “Thanks a lot,” I said. He lifted a hand and backed out into the street. I let myself in. The note I’d left for Jessica was on the coffee table. I screwed it up and took it out into the kitchen to drop in the refuse can. Glancing at my watch, I saw it was a little after five. She should be home in half an hour or less.

I wondered when they’d be here. It could be before she was, or it might be an hour, or two, or even tomorrow. As far as I could see, it didn’t make much difference. Even thinking of flight was ridiculous.

Well, I could at least take one final look at it. Turning, I went down the stairs to the den. Then I stopped in the doorway and stared. The lid of the trunk was thrown back and all the old clothing was piled on the floor in front of it. But I’d locked it! I must have. No. I’d looked at my watch, saw I had only ten minutes to get to the bank, and had slammed it shut but I’d forgotten to take out the key.

It was stupid and careless, but that wasn’t it. The trunk’s being locked or unlocked didn’t make a bit of difference. He had to know it was there, and he simply couldn’t have known. He didn’t even know it existed. He hadn’t had a single contact with the thing from beginning to end.

I stepped over by the trunk then, and happened to glance down on the floor beyond the end of it. The answer was there, in the little heap of sleazy pink underthings and stockings and the wrinkled print dress. I restrained a crazy impulse to laugh. It was in her overnight bag, in the back of the station wagon where I’d put it.

I put everything in the trunk, closed it, and sat down on top of it to light a cigarette. I was Godwin, the operator. Twice in the same day I had been out-maneuvered and completely made a fool of, separately, by two primitives operating a backwoods fishing camp.

I wondered when she had begun to catch on. It was probably when I switched that twenty-dollar bill in her bag. She must have discovered it wasn’t the same one she’d had and started then to put it all together, and of course it was no mystery at all to her where the twenty had originally come from. Cliffords had spent it at the camp.

So when she was up there that afternoon, she'd probably got Cliffords to describe the F.B.I. man who'd arrested him, and knew I'd found what I was after at last. Her maneuvering afterward was clever, too; you had to admit that.

She probably hadn't intended to try to grab it here at all. That would have been too improbable and too much to hope for. She'd merely planned to go along with me until she had a good chance somewhere farther along the line, and then grab it and clear out. My carrying the bag down here in the den and leaving it beside the trunk was practically the equivalent of putting up a sign telling her where it was, and my stupidity in forgetting to take the key out again was another telling her to help herself. That was the reason the bag had been out in the living-room. She was on her way from the den to the front door and the Sanport bus when he came in through the rear and caught her.

I shrugged it off. The whole thing was over now. No, I thought; not quite. There's one more slight matter, and that's to re-sell Mr. Nunn his little bill of goods. I thought about him very coldly. I'd pick up my own, but I was damned if I was going to buy his. His mistake was that he didn't know anything about this other business. I could tell the whole truth from beginning to end, including Cliffords, and the chances were they'd believe me. There was just a chance, too, that I might be able to help him trip himself up. Grady Collins was a bright young man who could use his head.

I went upstairs and called his office, and was lucky enough to catch him in.

"Barney Godwin," I said. "Has my friend Nunn been bothering you again?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, he has," Grady said. "He called up again about ten minutes ago. Still insists you've got his wife. You holding her for ransom, or what?"

"But he hasn't come in the office?"

"No."

"Well, I think he will. And probably before too long."

"What makes you think so, Barney?"

"I've always been interested in psychic phenomena. And unless I'm badly mistaken, Nunn is clairvoyant."

"Come again?"

“Don’t ask questions. Just listen. Make sure you’ve got a witness there all the time, and when Nunn comes in make sure he does all his talking before the witness. How’re you reading me?”

“Fine. Keep on.”

“Play it dumb. Keep brushing him off. If you do it long enough, and keep listening closely enough, he’ll tell you where his wife is.”

“All right,” he said. “Do you know where she is?”

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “I don’t even know where my own wife is.”

I was down in the den lying on the couch with a cigarette thirty minutes later when I heard her car pull into the garage. In a moment there was the clicking of high heels on the basement stairs. She appeared in the doorway. She had a new hair-do, new shoes, and a new dress that was loaded with the same old magic in the same old places.

I grinned at her. “You look wonderful.”

“You look pretty wonderful yourself,” she said.

She walked over by the sofa and stood looking down at me with eyes that were faintly misted. I made no move to get up.

“How was Sanport?” I asked.

“It was fine, I guess.”

Nobody said anything for a minute.

“Did you miss me?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said.

She slid to her knees beside the sofa, and then sat down on the floor. Her face was on her arms very near to mine and her eyes were brimming with tears.

“Barney,” she said, “you’re not helping me very much.”

“What are you trying to do, baby? I’ll help you if I can.”

“I’m trying to tell you that I love you more than anything in the world. It’s all I thought about all the time I was in Sanport and all the way home. . . .”

She went on talking, and I listened to her, reflecting that I was probably in love with her, which was an asinine situation when you thought of it. You couldn’t operate that way; you began to flub your lines and get awkward and emotional, like a teen-ager. It had ruined everything. Well, it was ruined anyway, so what difference did it make?

Above the sound of her voice I heard the car stop outside. They were about on schedule, I thought. Nunn had no doubt finally become too impatient and suggested they search the station wagon. I saw a pair of feet go by the basement window toward the kitchen porch. The doorbell began to chime in front.

“There’s somebody at the door,” I said. “I’ll go.”

“It’s probably just some pedlar,” she protested. “He’ll go away.”

The doorbell chimed again.

“I’ll tell him to go away,” I said. I got up.

She caught my hand. “Don’t be gone long, Barney.”

“Not any longer than necessary,” I said.

I went up the stairs and through the kitchen. Ramsey would have looked in the station wagon, I thought, even if Nunn hadn’t suggested it.

Porphyry, I thought. That was it. That detective’s name was Porfiry Petrovitch.

I opened the front door. It was Ramsey and Grady Collins. Ramsey was just about to ring the bell again.

